

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THREE DEFINING VALUES

Ephesians 4:1-6

Do you know the story about a pastor, a Boy Scout, and a world-renowned scientist who claimed to be the smartest man in the world? The three of them were passengers on a small plane which developed engine trouble. After exhausting all his options, the pilot ejected after insisting that his three passengers do the same.

There was only one problem. The passengers could find only two parachutes. The scientist insisted that the well-being and stability of the world depended on his expertise. So he quickly grabbed the gear and jumped out of the plane. The Boy Scout and the pastor looked at each other. The pastor said: "Go ahead and use the last parachute, son. God has given me a great life, and I'm ready to go to heaven."

The Boy Scout replied: "Don't worry, pastor. The smartest man in the world just jumped out of the plane wearing my backpack!"

There are some things in life that really are essential. And some things are non-essential, though at times we may get them confused. It takes wisdom, discernment and perspective – right thinking – to know the difference. And to make sure we don't misplace our focus.

May I share with you something I wrote in my doctor of ministry thesis? My study focused largely on what was called "The New Measures Controversy" in the Second Great Awakening which stirred this land between 1800 and 1835. The New Measures Controversy pitted revivalists Asahel Nettleton and Charles Finney against each other in a conflict of immense repercussions over what methods were appropriate and what methods were inappropriate to use in seeking to jump-start or to sustain a spiritual revival among God's people. Here is what I wrote:

It is regrettable that Charles Finney and Asahel Nettleton and their respective supporters in the controversy over revival methods... viewed each other as adversaries rather than allies in the cause of revival. Unquestionably their theological differences were real, but perhaps the gulf between them was not as great as Nettleton and the Old Calvinists perceived it to be. In pursuit of the commonly-held goal of the salvation of sinners and revival in the church, it is unfortunate that Finney and Nettleton could not either reconcile or rise above their differences over revival methods and present a unified front for the advancement of the gospel and the renewal of spiritual vitality in the church. The unresolved conflict between these two revival leaders and their respective allies may well have short-circuited the Second Great Awakening and caused it to run its course prematurely.

In conflicts and controversies over revival methods, the principle attributed to a 17th century German Lutheran theologian named Peter Meiderlin applies: *In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.*

What has happened far too often in the history of evangelicalism is that differences over non-essentials (such as worship styles, mode of baptism and... revival methods...) have been elevated to the status of essentials and have resulted in unnecessary and unhealthy divisions which have diluted both the strength of the church and the vitality of its witness in the world.

“In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” These words are familiar to you, I hope. They have been adopted as the motto of our denomination, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. They are among the defining values which have helped to forge and shape the identity and personality of the EPC since its founding in 1981. I want you to think with me for a bit this morning about these defining values and their significance for our life together.

IN ESSENTIALS, UNITY

I recall an occasion about ten years ago when Len Deibert (who did a wonderful job emceeding our anniversary dinner last night) described the history of Faith as a tapestry with four brilliant, intertwined threads. One of the threads he identified was the thread of unity. From the very beginning of this church twenty years ago in 1987, when the decision was made to leave Fairlington and to step out in faith to start a new church, God blessed and has continued to bless this fellowship with a remarkable spirit of unity.

Unity in the church is a God-thing. It is a gift from God. It is not something we can create or manufacture on our own. And it is a fragile thing as well. It is not something to trifle with or to take for granted. In Ephesians 4, after urging us to live our lives in a manner worthy of the calling we have received in Christ – that is, to live as fully-devoted followers of Christ (4:1), Paul says that we are to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (4:3). We are to exercise eternal vigilance and spare no effort to guard and strengthen the unity God has given us by His Spirit.

The unity of the Spirit is not a human achievement. It is a gift from God. But it takes hard work to maintain it and preserve it, so that we do not allow our preferences or differences in non-essential matters to divide us unnecessarily, or to destroy the fabric of unity God has given us in Christ.

A few months before Billy Graham became nationally famous as a result of his Los Angeles Crusade in the fall of 1949, he came to Altoona, Pennsylvania (where I was a pastor for 11 years before coming here to Faith in 1997). He and his team were in Altoona for two weeks in June of 1949, an experience so discouraging to Graham that he almost decided to give up his evangelistic ministry. The cause of his discouragement? There was so much discord and dissension among the churches in the community that the conflict between different factions in the Christian community overshadowed the

message of the gospel. And Billy Graham was tempted to give up. Thank God he didn't! But don't lose sight of the damage disunity in the church can cause.

The unity of the Spirit does not depend on uniformity of opinion or preferences or dress. It is okay to have differences of opinion and varying preferences, as long as we don't allow our personal preferences or opinions on non-essential matters to diminish or destroy the unity Christ desires for us to experience and exhibit.

Charles Stanley points out in his book *When the Enemy Strikes* that Satan, our adversary, seeks to divide us from one another so that we begin to war against one another rather than against him. The primary tactic the devil uses in dividing people, he says, is accusation. Accusation breeds distrust, anger, hatred, emotional pain, rejection, resentment, and bitterness, all of which either create or contribute to disunity. On the other hand, Stanley says, what unites us is love – God's love for us in Christ and the expression of our love for one another. In 1 Peter 4:8, Peter urges us to "love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." When we allow the love of Christ to cover our differences and disagreements, our faults and shortcomings, we discover that we are able to communicate better, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21), and work more effectively together in the service of Christ.

Unity in essentials is what we value. It is a unity rooted in our unwavering commitment to the Word of God. Without hesitation and without compromise, we affirm the Bible to be uniquely and fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, and to be the supreme and infallible and final authority on all matters on which it speaks (Taken from *The Essentials of Our Faith* of the EPC). Inspired. Unerring. Infallible. And authoritative. We believe what the Westminster Confession of Faith affirms: "The Bible speaks authoritatively and so deserves to be believed and obeyed. This authority does not depend on any man or church, but completely on God, its author, who is Himself truth. The Bible therefore is to be accepted as true, because it is the Word of God" (WCF 1.4).

It is in God's Word that we discover what the essentials are, both in terms of what we are to believe and how we are to live. And it is in our mutual submission to the Word of God – and to the God of the Word – that we experience the gift of unity.

Paul sets out for us in rapid succession in Ephesians 4:4-6 what some of the essentials are. Seven times in these three verses he uses the word "one."

One body. One Spirit. One hope. One Lord. One faith. One baptism. One God and Father of all.

There is one body, which is to say, there is ultimately one church, which belongs to Christ. The church is His body, and He is the Head of it. This one body consists of every true believer in Christ, every authentic follower of Christ, regardless of denominational affiliation. Not every church member or regular attender is necessarily a true follower of Christ. Just coming to church, or even becoming a member of the church, doesn't automatically make you a Christian. But every true believer in Christ in every time and

place, every person who has received God's saving grace through faith in Christ, is a part of His body.

It would be unholy arrogance for anyone or any church to claim that theirs is the only true church, or that only those who are a part of their particular denomination have any hope of heaven. That is simply not biblical.

There is one body, one true church, and it belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ, not to us. It does not belong to me or any pastor. It does not belong to the elders. It does not belong to any of us. It belongs to Jesus.

Just as there is one body, there is one Spirit – the Holy Spirit who breathes new life into the hearts of believers and gives gifts to the people of God for ministry, equipping and empowering us to be God's servants in the church and the world, and leading us into the fullness of God's truth so that we may honor and exalt Christ above all else in our lives. The Holy Spirit is the agent of Christian unity. It is the Holy Spirit residing within us and working in us who holds the body of Christ together in unity, keeping us from fragmenting or splintering or breaking apart over things that should never separate us.

One body. One Spirit. One hope. Our one hope is Jesus Christ alone. In Colossians 1:27, Paul says that Christ in you is the hope of glory. Christ alone is our hope of heaven. Christ alone is our hope of forgiveness and peace with God. Christ alone is our hope of eternal life. As Peter said to Jesus when many of those who had been following Jesus turned back and left him: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Where else can we turn?

To hope in Christ is to have a sure and certain hope. The hope we have in Christ, we are told in Hebrews 6:19, is "an anchor for our souls, firm and secure." To hope in anyone or anything else will ultimately lead to disappointment and despair, because only Jesus has the power to save. Only Jesus is qualified. Only Jesus can deliver in the end. Remember what Peter said in Acts 4:12: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." No other name. Only Jesus. And those who put their hope in Him will not be disappointed.

There is only one Lord, and He will permit no rivals. He will not tolerate divided loyalties. Jesus understood us so well. He understood the inclinations of our hearts. That is why He said in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:24) that you cannot serve both God and money. You cannot serve both God and power. You cannot serve both God and pleasure. Or God and knowledge. Or God and health. Or God and football. You cannot allow anything in your life to become more important than – or as important as – God. Because He alone is Lord. And God alone deserves our highest allegiance.

Just as there is only one Lord, there is only one true faith. There is only one true faith, because there is only one true Savior, and that is Jesus Christ. And the Bible tells us that we are to contend earnestly for the faith that was once for all delivered to the church (Jude 3), because what we believe has enormous, even eternal consequences.

Only one faith. As I said last Sunday, faith must have the proper object if it is to be of any value. Without faith – without a trusting faith in the sufficiency and sovereignty of God, it is impossible to please God.

Next, Paul says, there is one baptism. Baptism, as you know, is one of the two sacraments of the church. It is the sacramental sign of identification with Christ and His people in the church. It signifies cleansing from sin and new life in Christ. It is a sign of God's grace. In the baptism of a child, it is a sign of inclusion in the covenant community of the church.

The central thing in baptism is not the sign itself, which is water. Nor is it the manner in which baptism is administered, whether it is done by sprinkling, pouring, or immersion. What matters most is not the sign or the manner of administration, but what it points to, which is our identification with Christ, our entrance into the community of believers, and our cleansing from sin. Baptism does not achieve for us the cleansing from sin. It is simply a sacramental sign that points to God's gracious work in Christ. The "how" of baptism is not the most important thing. The meaning is.

The seventh and final essential Paul identifies here is one God and Father of us all. There is only one true and living God. He is the Creator and Sustainer of everything there is. He is the sovereign God of the universe. He is the One in whom we live and move and have our being. He is the God who has revealed Himself and His Word in history – which is His story – and most fully in the life, death and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ.

One body. One Spirit. One hope. One Lord. One faith. One baptism. One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all who belong to Him by faith. In the essentials of our faith, God's will is unity. We are to tolerate no compromise, no watering down of the message, no erosion of our commitment to the truth of the gospel. God's will is unity in the essentials, and that unity is God's gift to us.

Our task is to guard it well, to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace, and to do it in a way that honors God, reflects the character of Jesus, and builds up the body.

IN NON-ESSENTIALS, LIBERTY

In the essentials of the faith, we are called to unity. In non-essentials, we are given the grace of liberty. Here are three Bible verses for your consideration:

Galatians 5:1: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free."

Galatians 5:13: "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love."

1 Peter 2:16: "Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil."

Freedom is our birthright as members of God's family. But it is a particular kind of freedom. Jesus died to set us free from the power of sin. He died to set us free from the burden of our guilt. He died to set us free from the requirement that we live by an unattainable list of rules and regulations in order to win God's approval. From all that, Christ has set us free.

But we are not to use the freedom we have received in Christ as an excuse for doing wrong or as a license for self-indulgence. We are not to use our liberty as a base of operations from which to do whatever we please, regardless of what God thinks about it.

The freedom we have in Christ is not freedom to sin. It is freedom from sin. It is not the right to insist on our own way. It is the freedom to serve God by serving one another.

In those non-essentials of the Christian faith and life, in those issues and convictions which are secondary to the heart of the gospel, in matters of preference and tradition and style which are not prescribed in the Bible, we are given the gift of freedom. But we must accord to our Christian brothers and sisters the same liberty we enjoy. And we must be careful in the exercise of our liberty not to undermine or jeopardize our fundamental unity in Christ.

In America we are free to believe anything we want or choose any lifestyle that appeals to us (within the bounds of the law). But we are not free to believe anything we want or choose any lifestyle we desire and still call ourselves Christian. We do not have the freedom to call good evil and evil good, or to call truth error and error truth, and still claim to be followers of Christ. No one has that right. If we claim to be Christians and wish to be called by Christ's name, then we must embrace the truth of His Word by faith and follow Him in faithful obedience.

In essentials, God calls us to unity. In non-essentials, God gives us liberty. But He holds us responsible for the way we exercise it.

The freedom we have in Christ is a wonderful thing. So too is the liberty we experience in the non-essentials of the faith. Let's be careful that we not lose our unity by allowing our liberty in the non-essentials to become a source of contention, criticism, discord or division.

IN ALL THINGS, CHARITY

The Bible has a lot to say about charity, or love. Mostly what it says is "just do it."

In Ephesians 5:1-2, for example, Paul says: "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

In *The Message* it says: "Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep

company with Him and learn a life of love.” Jesus Himself said: “As I have loved you, love one another. This is how people will test the genuineness of your claim to be my disciples – by the love they see in your relationships” (John 13:34-35).

Romans 12:9 says: “Don’t just pretend that you love others. Really love them” (NLT).

1 Peter 1:22 in *The Message* says: “Love one another as if your lives depended on it.”

And in Ephesians 4:2 Paul urges us to bear with one another in love.

The bottom line is that none of us is ever going to be perfect here on earth, and sooner or later – probably sooner rather than later – you are going to find some area of disagreement or disappointment, something that irritates you, something you don’t like about every person you know. And they will discover something about you. That is where charity comes in. That is why love is so important. It is the thing that binds us together and holds us together in perfect harmony in spite of all our disappointments and differences and imperfections.

So let us renew our commitment to love one another and to bear with one another in love. Even when we disagree with one another.

CONCLUSION

In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.

For the last 20 years, since this church was founded in 1987, these values have served us well. And they will continue to do so, if we let them. More than just the words of our denominational motto, may these qualities and values continue to mark and shape our lives and our life together as a local expression of the body of Christ. To the glory and praise of God. Amen.