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Five Principles for the Church in the 21st Century - Part One

By Tal Davis

Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 being diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you also were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4: 1-6 NASB)

One of the best movies of all time was Stanley Kubrick's 1968 science fiction classic, *2001 A Space Odyssey*. That film had incredible special effects produced long before the creation of CGI in the early 1990s. It was a story, set in the first year of the 21st century, picturing a time when civilian space travel was common and the Moon was fully colonized. Of course, next week we enter into the year 2022 and most of the technological predictions of Kubrick's film are still far from being realized. We landed twelve men on the Moon in the early 1970s but never went back.

People born in the 1970s or after, especially those born in this century, have no memory of the exciting days of early space travel. They take trips into low Earth orbit and to the International Space Station as routine and not worthy of much notice. They also do not recall the stress older folks lived with during the Cold War. In any case, it is always wise to reflect on where we have come and, more importantly, where we are going. Each new generation needs to assess its purposes and goals for the present and the future.

Churches, likewise, need to evaluate themselves in each new generation. They need to examine what they are doing and what they want to accomplish moving forward. Churches that refuse to look honestly at themselves, or are locked into the ways of the past, are doomed to irrelevancy.

In this two part article we will consider what should be important for churches in the this 21st century. Oddly enough, to make that determination we have to go back to the First Century. About the year AD 61, the Apostle Paul, while he was in prison (probably in Rome), wrote a letter to "the saints who are at Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus." Ephesus was an important city near the west coast of Asia Minor (now Turkey). Paul had ministered there for three years and helped plant a church that had grown remarkably.

In the fourth chapter of this letter Paul presents several key principles that should characterize a church in his generation. These are the standards by which churches in this century should evaluate themselves as well. We will survey each principle and see how they apply to our current situation. In this installment we will analyze the first two of five such principles that we find in verses 1-6. In Part Two we will study verses 7 and 11-13.

Principle One: The Church in the 21st Century Should Humbly Walk in the Way of Love. (vss. 1-2)

Paul begins by reminding his readers of their responsibility to walk in the way Jesus intended for them to do.

1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness,

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with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love. (Ephesians 4:1-2)

Most Americans love sports and idolize great athletes. But let's face it, there are two kinds of athletes. Some are arrogant and self-centered. I recall once attending a Little League baseball game at a park in Florida. A famous athlete was present sitting in a lawn chair watching his son play in the game. A couple of young girls approached him to ask for his autograph but he gruffly refused and asked them not to bother him.

Others are humble and see their notoriety as a chance to glorify God. Heisman Trophy winners Charlie Ward and Tim Tebow are two such examples. Both have used their sports platforms to give glory to Christ.

For Paul, humility and love are critical qualities for Christian individuals and for churches. Perhaps no quality should characterize a church more than that of love for one another. This is particularly true in this current time. As the culture has become increasingly secularized and Christianity has come under attack from anti-God forces, our love is the strongest evidence we have for the authenticity of our faith.

Principle Two: The Church in the 21st Century Should Be United in Christ. (vss. 3-6)

3 Being diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you also were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:3-6)

We hear a lot of people these days calling for everyone to be "united."

The problem is that they do not agree on what to be united about. The truth is people, at least in the United States, are probably less united today than ever. Disagreements over politics, racial issues, gender issues, morality, and religion are rampant. But Paul states that such divisive situations should not characterize the Body of Christ.

That being said, there are actually two ways that unity can be established in an organization. First is through total uniformity where everyone walks in lock step without any place for disagreements. Recently a book was released by a former government official of North Korea who defected to the south. He describes a nation where everyone acts with absolute total uniformity in every area of life. Dissent is not tolerated and people live in fear of offending the communist regime at the danger of being thrown in prison or even killed.

Obviously, churches in this country do not wield that kind of power over their members. People are free to walk away if they are unhappy with the church policies. Nonetheless, some churches are controlled by leaders who expect unquestioning obedience to their decisions. Most cults function in this manner, but, unfortunately, even some evangelical congregations have a leader or leaders who demand loyalty to what they say. Anyone who disagrees is either silenced or put out of the fellowship. This is not the kind of unity that Paul is advocating.

There is a better second way. An organization can be unified around a guiding principle. That is, a group can all focus together on accomplishing some important task or advocating an idea. This is Paul's way. Christian churches are to be unified around the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is the tie that binds believers together. Paul says that this unity is a supernatural product of the Holy Spirit. Notice all the "Ones" he

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mentions in verses four through six: *one body; one Spirit; one hope; one Lord; one faith; one baptism; one God and Father*. These are the absolute bases for which a church should stand. Notice that they are laser focused. There is only one way of salvation and the church should unify around it. When believers focus their attention on the things that matter most they will be naturally united.

That does not mean they will never have disagreements. Christians can

express disagreements when they are appropriate. But they should always be clothed in the love of Christ and a consensus prayerfully sought to resolve issues. Angry outbursts in business, deacon, elder, or session meetings have no place in the church. One important dimension of this unity is for the church to choose good leaders. This we will see in the next installment as we look at three other key principles Paul details for the church in the First Century and for us in the Twenty-First Century.

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