

Mutual Respect, A Basic Christian Principle

"Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, [being] of one accord, of one mind. [Let] nothing [be] done] through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves." (Phil. 2:2-3)

It may be useful to consider the title of this introduction, Mutual Respect, a Basic Christian Principle. The word 'basic' means relating to or forming the base or essence. If we think about this in the sense of a structure or building, the base is the foundation. It is the foundation that carries the entire weight of the building. It has this characteristic that it does not move, but rather is permanent. The word 'principle' means a comprehensive and fundamental law, doctrine or assumption. Thus a 'basic principle' is a fundamental law or assumption that is stable and unchanging. It endures the passage of time, serving as a guidepost that guides our behavior on the walk of faith.

The word 'mutual' means directed by each to the other or others. It carries a sense of reciprocity or having to do with the give and take, the back and forth of human relationships. It also has a sense of joint or shared activities or interests. Thus mutual in the sense that we use it here, deals with both the respect we show for each other, and also the respect we show for the joint or shared congregational activities and possessions. Finally, the word 'respect' means high or special regard: esteem. It follows, then, that mutual respect is the high or special regard that we as believers have for each other and for our shared congregation. The admonitions and instructions that we receive on these matters are those enduring principles dealing with how we as believers deal with each other, both individually and with the collective congregation.

It has been said that the flock of the believers is a level headed flock. This means that one does not stand out by virtue of God given gifts, or by position, or by standing in the congregation as better or of greater value than the other members. In Leviticus 19:15 it is written "Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty: [but] in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour." There are numerous other such instructions. No one of us has greater value in the sight of God than another. We are all God's created beings.

God has not been sparing with His instructions to His children as to how we should treat each other. Paul writes the Bible portion that was quoted in the beginning to encourage the Phillipian believers, and us today, to remain of one mind, of one heart and of one accord in our faith in Christ Jesus.

This instruction tells us how we should approach each other, "in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves" in order to avoid strife. This is the kind of respect that we as believers have for each other. I have to admit that my flesh regards this teaching as a hard lesson. I, and perhaps some others with me, would be tempted to make granting this kind of respect conditional, dependent on how my brother might first treat me.

This kind of temptation may well be the strongest in those relationships that are the closest, such as between spouses or in the same family. We know the other so well, and know so well how the other is likely to respond, that we may already be anticipating the rebuttal while we are still preparing our own speech. It may even happen that in discussion we use the time that the other speaks to plan our own follow up speech rather than listening to what the other has to say. One may become so intent on presenting his own view that the basic courtesy that would readily be extended to a stranger is not given to those that may be the dearest.

As parents we realize that it is our obligation, and perhaps our most fundamental and important obligation, to teach our children the precepts of living faith. We do not teach faith as one might teach an academic subject, but we also teach by example. We teach respect to our children by showing respect for them.

Jesus teaches us 'And as ye would that men should do to you do ye also to them likewise.' Luke b:31. Here Jesus is telling how we should behave with anyone, not just believers. Again the instruction is unconditional. It is simply the right way to live.

The matter of respect is evident even in simple courtesy and manners. In these areas there seems to be a pressing need on the part of parents to understand the world in which our children live. We believers are in the world but not of the world. Still we cannot help but be influenced by the world around us, and so are our children. Manners change with the times. What may be considered rude in one generation may be acceptable in the next. Bowing, for example, would seem very quaint and outdated today, but was at one time required to be mannerly. We must acknowledge that less formality is required today than a generation ago. It may be easy then to accept an erosion of respect along with a reduction in formality. Formality is not of God, but respect is. It seems, therefore, that an extra burden rests with the parents, the youthwork activities, the Sunday school and so on to ensure that our children understand this matter of respect. Respect for each other and for our mutual congregational affairs.

We recall the Old Testament story of Elijah, who after he brought down fire from heaven and slew the prophets of Baal was forced to flee to the wilderness. He lived for a time in a cave. There the Lord appeared to him (I Kings 19:11-12) "And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; [but] the LORD (was) not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; [but] the LORD [was] not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; [but] the LORD [was] not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice." Elijah had at that time dried up in the spirit and God wanted to show him that he was not alone in his fight against the false prophets and wrong spirits. God revealed himself to Elijah in a still small voice and not in the more spectacular displays of a wind storm or an earthquake. I have wondered if this applies to us today as a reminder that God will isn't revealed just at large congregation meetings, at camps and at other larger events, but is there in the small everyday interaction between, say, parents and children. The instruction at home, the visiting between parents and

children, mealtimes, family get-togethers, and so on may be more important in teaching respect to our children than all the formal lessons that they will ever receive.

Perhaps this extends to other interaction between believers, also. Simple respect shown for each other, even greeting each other with "God's Peace", reminds the fellow traveller that he too is a child of God. Visiting other believers and inviting them to our homes provides many opportunities to discuss this way and journey of faith. These small, everyday exchanges between believers offer encouragement to our lives of faith. These seemingly unimportant events are a source of strength to the believer.

In congregational activities the matter of respect is also apparent. One might feel, for example, that in order to maintain oneness of mind that there is not freedom to express a differing opinion on some congregational issue. Paul devotes the entire twelfth chapter of Romans to the topic of how we get along on matters of mutual concern. He points out how there are many gifts, many offices, many members of this one congregation. All gifts are necessary for the upbuilding of the one congregation. We all have the freedom to speak openly of our understanding on congregational affairs. Not only is there freedom to bring out our views, but also an obligation. We each have our unique place of watching in this kingdom. We are under an obligation to the rest of God's children to speak of the matters as we each come to understand them. Paul also points out how these opinions are to be brought out. In Romans 12:3 it is written "For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think [of himself] more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith." And in the tenth verse, "[Be] kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another;". Thus by showing honor and esteem for the other, various views can be brought out in a respectful manner that most assuredly will not bring offense. When opinions and thoughts are spoken with respect for the other members of the congregation, there need be no fear of restricting Christian freedom.

Finally, Peter writes that we "as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house". We are the members of that living congregation of God on this earth. Love, stirred in with mutual respect, is, perhaps, the mortar that is between these stones. That mortar conforms to the contour of the individual stone, allowing for its unique shape, while at the same time joining it with the other stones to make a solid structure. Mutual respect allows for individual differences while joining each to the other, thereby making one unified congregation of God.

Dan Wuollet