

All three of our readings this morning speak about humility. Humility is, of course, a great virtue. Yet the world often misunderstands what humility truly is. One of the accusations the world often brings against conservative Christian denominations today is that they are prideful, acting contrary to the humility shown by Jesus. Denominations such as ours are said to be divisive, unwilling to put aside differences and join together with others.

The irony is that, contrary to the world's accusations, such conservative church bodies actually display true humility, because true humility is humility before God, not the world. In humbling ourselves before God, we seek for true unity, not just the superficial idea held by the world. That's what St. Paul is writing about in our Epistle reading. To put it simply, true humility before Christ and His word leads to true unity among Christians.

To help us understand this, let's first consider the opposite: the world's view of humility and unity. To the world, humility is shown when one person believes what he wants, and another person believes what she wants, and everyone is nice and kind and agrees to just get along, never insisting that anyone is particular is right. The world says that if you do this, you can have unity. And it sounds really appealing, doesn't it? Such a "humble" church would be welcoming and accommodating, so many different people coming together.

But the irony is, such an attitude actually produces a lot of division. Consider what St. Paul writes to the Ephesians, that "There is one body and one Spirit." If one group believes that the body spoken of there consists of all those who believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and another group believes that that body includes all those physically descended from Abraham, regardless of faith in Jesus, those two groups can't be said to have true unity in that body.

Or, if a Christian professes that the Spirit is the Third Person of the Holy Trinity who has worked faith in his heart, and a Jehovah's Witness professes that the Spirit is merely the impersonal energy or force through which God works, the two people cannot honestly say they have the same Spirit.

Or, if a Christian confesses the ancient creeds of the Church, which affirm St. Paul's words that there is one God and Father of all, and a Mormon says such creeds are an abomination and that there are many gods and fathers throughout time and space, then the two obviously cannot have unity as the Bible speaks of unity, because they clearly don't worship the same God.

The idea of worship is a good illustration of why true unity can't be found by just ignoring differences, because worship is one of those places where belief and action – or practice – are tied together. Or to put it another way, what is believed in the heart comes out in a person's words and actions, and therefore the unity of the Church is found in both what is taught and believed and in what is practiced or done publicly.

You can't join together in prayer if you're not praying to the same God. You can't share the Gospel together if you can't agree on what the Gospel is. Thus St. Paul exhorts us Christians to "with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

That idea of oneness – one mind and one mouth glorifying the one Lord, one God, one Father in the one hope of the one faith, is what true Biblical, Christian unity is about. And it's tied to true, Biblical, Christian humility. Rather than glorifying ourselves, and all the other opinions of men, seeking how much we can stretch and bend the Word of God to accommodate as many people as possible (which we don't have the authority to do), we humble ourselves before the God of glory and the Word that He has given to us.

We confess that God is God, and we are not. We confess that He is the Lord, not you or I. And so when our Lord and God speaks to us in His Word, we yield ourselves to it, taking every thought captive to Christ, as the word tells us to do. It's being unified around the word that we have true unity.

Take for example the "one baptism" spoken of in our text. Neither you nor I get to define what Baptism is or what it does, because God has established it in His Word. He says that it must be done in His Triune name, the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Any baptism done in a different name, or not believing in that Trinity, is not the one Baptism.

Our Lord also says that Baptism joins a person to the death of Jesus, washing away sin by the blood shed at that death, and also to the resurrection of Jesus, giving the life which Jesus showed forth when He rose on the third day. God's word also speaks of Baptism as "the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit." And very directly, it says, "Baptism... now saves you." Therefore, according to what God has said in His Word, Baptism cannot be a mere symbol, something done by man to show His faith or obedience to God.

Finally, the Scriptures tell us that Baptism replaces circumcision, which was done at eight days old, and also that even the little ones can believe in Jesus, and so we therefore baptize both adults and young children – even infants – because God sets that forth in the Word.

Now, do we fully understand how God works through Baptism, and how even infants can have saving faith, and why God chose to establish Baptism as He did? No, we don't, not fully. Nevertheless, we humble ourselves before God and His word, trusting in Him as the Lord who loves us and who always does what is best for us and for all people.

This is true of many other things, not just Baptism. When God tells us in His word that His word is perfect, coming from the Holy Spirit, then we humbly believe that, rather than trying to say that certain parts are from God and other parts are from man, and it's up to us to use our reason and sort it all out. When God defines what marriage is, and what a man and a woman are, then we humbly submit to those truths and give thanks to God for creating us as He has. When the Lord tells us that His Supper is His body and His blood, and what it means to partake, and who may and may not partake, then we yield ourselves to His word, because it's His Supper.

As we humble ourselves before our Lord, then we'll find true unity with others who do the same. In this unity, we won't have to contort or twist our understandings in an effort to reach a compromise, nor will we have to relegate portions of God's word to things we don't talk about, like politics at Thanksgiving dinner or something.

Instead, we can give thanks to God for the blessings that He gives to us, and rejoice in the truth that He has revealed to us. In this truth, we can share the one hope which we have with the world around us, that Jesus Christ the Lord has given His very life for us so that we sinners might be forgiven and granted eternal life in the place of the death we deserved.

Being grounded and unified in a common understanding of the truth is also a benefit to outreach, in that it is easier to share the faith with others when you have a firm understanding of it, and also that people who are looking for a church in today's day are looking for one that stands firmly on its principles and takes what it believes seriously, as compared to a wishy-washy church that is blown along with the winds of the world.

Now then, we should rightly ask, what about all those we encounter who don't share in our understanding of what God teaches in His word? Here, St. Paul's words in our Epistle provide excellent direction. "Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

How were we called? In the love and mercy of the Lord Jesus, who called us even though we were totally undeserving. Likewise, we then freely and gladly share our faith with whomever the Lord might put in our lives, not thinking that they are undeserving of the Gospel call.

We also engage with humility. Again, this doesn't mean throwing up our hands and saying that the Bible can't be understood by men, and so anything – and interpretation – goes. No, it's approaching others with the Bible and humbly saying, "This is what the God who is over all has lovingly revealed to us in His word of truth." In humility we also compare our own beliefs and practices to God's word, making sure we are following the word above all.

We speak with gentleness, not seeking to use the truth as a club, but desiring that others know the truth and be given the wonderful comfort and reassurance that it gives. We also speak with patience, reflecting the patience God shows to us as He continues to lead us through His word to a greater understanding of His truth and a stronger faith.

At times, there will be those who, despite humble and patient dialog, we still do not totally agree with, such as our friends and relatives in other Christian denominations, and there we heed the Scripture's admonition to bear with one another in love. We are honest about our differences and the reality that we are not in full fellowship with them, but at the same time we still love them and desire the best for them, and where they profess Jesus as Lord and Savior acknowledge them as true Christians.

And we are called to pray constantly that God the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth, would bring us His true unity, that we may be preserved in the bond of peace.

Our Lord Jesus calls us to humility, even as He humbled Himself to the point of the cross for our sakes. He never compromised the truth or watered it down, but He always spoke it in love for those He was sent to save.

We follow in His footsteps when we humble ourselves before Him and His holy word. We speak in humility and love with others, and we pray for the day when He will gather us all into His eternal kingdom and restore us in the full unity of His truth.

In the one name of the Lord Jesus, amen.