

Part 2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament
K. Discipleship Challenges
33. Unity among God's People

We've been talking about issues that are particularly challenging to those who wish to be good disciples of Christ. Today, I want to speak with you about one more challenge—maintaining unity among God's people—that biblical idea that everyone agrees is so important, but which seems so difficult to achieve.

Every day's news brings more stories about conflict between various groups of people who have radically different ideas about such things as politics, religion, culture, and personal and societal ethics. I guess that's somewhat understandable given the big differences in worldviews among the people on this planet. But what are less understandable and acceptable are the increasing rifts among those who self-identify as people saved by God through Jesus Christ.

Disunity among the people of God is not new, of course. Otherwise there would not be nearly so many denominations as there now are. But we will do well to take another look at how much God values unity among those with whom he has entered into a special and saving relationship.

One of the first things to emphasize in this context, is that God is after much more than the snatching of individuals from their death-dealing ways and making them fit for fellowship with him and for heaven. God is building a kingdom and a community over whom he rules and whose members live and work together in service to him.

Therefore, pity those Christians who think that the Christian life is only about a personal and private relationship with God, and who suppose neither that they need ministering to by God's family, nor that they have any duty to help form a supportive community for their brothers and sisters in Christ. Every believer has a responsibility to minister TO and WITH other people of God, and to be ministered to—with support and correction—BY their brothers and sisters in Christ, whom the apostle Paul calls the Body of Christ.

The Body of Christ is an organic community. The dysfunction of any part, affects every other; the sin of one member pollutes everyone. So the people of God as a whole, in every age, are responsible to be a community, united and working together, under their Sovereign Lord.

This perspective is very clear in the New Testament. But it is clear also in the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Take, for example, the story of Achan in Joshua 7. Prior to the taking of Jericho God had made it very clear that everything in the city was to be destroyed except for the silver and gold and articles of bronze and iron, which were to be devoted to the Lord's treasury. Any deviation from this command would render Israel itself liable to the destruction God intended for Jericho (cf. Josh. 6:18-19).

This emphasis on the culpability on the whole of Israel is reinforced by what happened when one Israelite—Achan—took some of the devoted things. Joshua 7:1, speaking of Achan's disobedience, attributes unfaithfulness to the whole community, and says, "*So the Lord's anger burned against Israel.*" God's indictment is repeated in vs. 11:

"Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions."

The sin of one man (or one family, which may have been complicit in Achan's actions, affected the whole community, and things were not right in that community until that sin was atoned for. Shortly afterwards, to reemphasize the importance of Israel's mission from God and the agreement of the whole community in this, all the people gathered together for a covenant renewal ceremony involving sacrifices, a re-reading of God's law, and presumably also the pledges of the community to wholeheartedly obey God and his law. Once again, for a while at least, there was unity among the people of God.

Israel then went on to take the rest of the land to which God had brought them. They were not entirely successful in vanquishing all their enemies, but they established good footholds within the lands allotted to each of Israel's tribes. God expected each tribe to continue to drive out the Canaanites within its territory. But with that understanding he considered that his promise of a home for Abraham's descendants was now fulfilled. That's the meaning of these final words of Josh. 21:44-45: *The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. Not one of all the LORD's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled.*

These words are reminiscent of the verdict of God after he finished creating the universe (Gen 1:21): *God saw all that he had made and it was very good.* Here again, God saw all that he had done in this new Paradise, and it was good. The enemies of God and Israel had been vanquished, and all God's promises fulfilled.

But, what about the future? How could Israel make sure its future was as good as its present? The answer to this implicit question is given in a famous and often-quoted passage—Josh 24:14-15—which records one of Joshua's last admonitions to Israel. Here's part of it:

"Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness... choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

This is actually the conclusion of Joshua's speech. It followed a summary of what the Lord had done for Israel in the past 500 years – of how their fathers had prospered, and how it was that they themselves were here in the Promised Land. The Lord had done it. And what he had done in the past, he would do in the future for those who remained faithful. The bottom line was this: "If you want a future in this great land, you must always be loyal to the Lord and serve him." That's what Joshua wanted Israel to memorize and live by.

If the Israelites were to say "Yes" to this, the people understood that they would also be saying "Yes" to the Lord's will regarding their relationships with the people around them, including both the other Israelite tribes, and the people outside of the community of Israel. In other words, they would be recommitting themselves to unity within the family of God and to guarding themselves against anything that threatened their ability to be the community God wanted them to be.

The events of Joshua 22 give an example of the sort of commitment God wanted from his people. This chapter begins with Joshua calling three tribes together: the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, to send them on their way to their families and settlements. Previously, the fighting men of these tribes had left their families and possessions back on the east side of the Jordan so that they could help the rest of Israel gain their inheritance on the west Side. Now that this work had progressed far enough so that all the tribes could continue on their own, the men of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh could return home. This, they proceeded to do, but on the way, they stopped to build an imposing altar on the west bank of the Jordan.

However, when the other tribes heard about the altar, they were so provoked that (see Josh. 22:12): *The whole assembly of Israel gathered at Shiloh to go to war against them.* It seems such a little thing; the joyful trans-Jordan tribes take time to build an imposing altar before they cross the Jordan and rejoin their families. But this makes the rest of Israel so upset that they prepare to go to war against their kinsmen.

The reason becomes clear in the question that Israel sent a delegation to ask the trans-Jordan tribes (Josh 22:16-18): *"How could you break faith with the God of Israel like this? How could you turn away from the LORD and build yourselves an altar in rebellion against him now? Was not the sin of Peor enough for us? Up to this very day we have not cleansed ourselves from that sin, even though a plague fell on the community of the LORD! And are you now turning away from the LORD? "If you rebel against the LORD today, tomorrow he will be angry with the whole community of Israel. If the land you possess is defiled, come over to the LORD's land, where the LORD's tabernacle stands, and share the land with us. But do not rebel against the LORD or against us by building an altar for yourselves, other than the altar of the LORD our God. When Achan son of Zerah was unfaithful in regard to the devoted things, did not wrath come on the whole community of Israel? He was not the only one who died for his sin."*

The rest of Israel clearly regarded the building of this altar as outright rebellion against the Lord. That was because the Lord's altar was in Shiloh. And the only reason they could think of for the building of this additional altar was for the purpose of worshiping the false gods of the Canaanites. The nine and a half tribes west of the Jordan might have said, "Let the others go their own way. If they want to serve other gods, that's their problem, not ours." But they didn't, and they couldn't say that because, as had been drummed into them, there were twelve tribes of Israel that constituted the community of God's people; the whole community had to stand together, or they would fall together.

Israel's past history had made that clear. In fact, reference is made in these verses to two particular occasions on which the Lord had made it clear that the sin of part of Israel had drastic effects upon the whole community.

The first occasion was the "sin of Peor." That is described in Numbers 25. At that time, Balaam and the Moabites had enticed some of the Israelites into worshiping Baal of Peor. That had caused the Lord's anger to burn against Israel. A plague broke out and the Lord's anger was not averted until Phinehas, acting as the Lord's righteous servant, brought the Lord's judgment on two of the offenders. It was this same Phinehas, now 45 years older, who headed the current delegation of Israel.

The other occasion was the sin of Achan; that also had caused the Lord's anger to "burn" against Israel until Achan's sin was rooted out and atoned for by the death of himself and his family. Achan's sin and the sin of Peor were both sins of rebellion against the Lord God. They both were the sins of just part of Israel, but in both cases the Lord's anger burned against the whole of Israel.

The faithful Israelites did not want the Lord's anger to burn again. This is why all of Israel, assembled for war at Shiloh, waited for the report of their delegation. But, war was averted by the response of the trans-Jordan tribes, who were aghast at how the rest of Israel had misinterpreted their intentions. "Oh no!," they reassured the delegation. "Rebellion was the last thing on our minds. We were afraid that because the Jordan forms a boundary between us and the rest of Israel, that your descendants might someday forbid ours from worshiping the Lord. So we built this altar as a witness to future generations that we too love and serve the Lord and that we will always worship him in his sanctuary."

At this, the delegation from Israel breathed a collective sigh of relief and when they returned to report to the other tribes, the whole community joined together in praising God.

So then, do you see that Joshua's sermon on loyalty to God assumes that all of Israel must be together on this very issue. The tribes of Israel were accountable to each other for their loyalty to the Lord. If one failed, they all would suffer. It wasn't a case of "Do your own thing and don't worry about those around you."

It was rather, "You are in this together as servants of the Lord, and you must keep the whole community of Israel pure." As you can see then, Joshua's exhortation that the Israelites choose for themselves whom they would serve did not expect an individualistic response—some choosing to serve the Lord and others choosing not to. It was all or nothing for Israel. God expected a unified response from his people, and a commitment to do whatever it took to preserve their identity as the people of God.

Perhaps you remember how all of Israel responded to Joshua's end-of-life question. All of Israel stepped forward together to pledge allegiance to the Lord, realizing that even a partial failure to do so would subject them to the burning anger of God and his discipline to make them faithful again.

There were many other events in Israel's later history that also testify to the importance of their unity as the people of God. I'll just mention a few examples from the book of Judges.

- 8:1 The Ephraimites criticized Gideon for not calling them to participate in the fight against their enemies. In effect they were saying, "As God's people, we're supposed to be in this together. Why didn't you ask us to help you?"
- 8:6,8 The towns of Succoth and Peniel paid a big price for not assisting Gideon's fighting men when they needed food and water. As part of God's people, they had a duty to help their brothers in need.
- ch 19-21 The town of Gibeah of the tribe of Benjamin refused hospitality to a traveling Levite. What's worse, the men of Gibeah abused the Levite's concubine so much that she died from it. In response, the Levite sent a strong message to the rest of Israel's tribes asking for their help in disciplining the tribe of Benjamin for their sin. The other tribes responded by uniting to fight against Benjamin, killing all but 600 men of that tribe.

But that raised another concern for Israel, who then became worried about the tribe of Benjamin dying off. So they agreed on some unique provisions whereby the tribe of Benjamin, and thereby the unity of Israel, could be preserved. In other words, Benjamin was severely disciplined for their sin, but then readmitted into the fellowship of the family of God.

All of this emphasis on unity among the members of God's Old Covenant family still has implications for God's New Covenant family—the church, and for its commitment to unity. All of us who have pledged loyalty to the Lord God are accountable to each other; we owe each other the sort of support and loving discipline that will help us remain the faithful people of God. It's not that our discipline will look the same as that which God's people exercised under the Old Covenant. We live in a different age and not in a theocracy. Furthermore, we take our cue from Christ's unveiling of the spirit of God's rules for living.

Still, remembering that God still does not take rebellion lightly—I'm speaking here of unholiness and disobedience within the family of God—the church of Christ is also bound not to take unholiness and disobedience lightly, for we are bound together in common cause for the Lord. Yet our discipline must always be tempered and motivated by love. When loving discipline works, it's time for rejoicing, for through it God's kingdom moves forward.

This call to unity among God's people doesn't mean that we are to avoid contact with the world. No, we believe that God has given us a mandate to take the good news to our neighbors, so that we may win to Christ those who have not yet submitted to his authority.

And yet the principles of Joshua's guidelines apply primarily to God's people, who must be very careful that we are not seduced by the ways and the things of the world. The church must go into the world, but don't let the world into the church. Do not misunderstand. We must do what we can to welcome all in need of Jesus Christ. But we must not accept worldly ways. We must not let the world transform the church, but, by the power of the Holy Spirit, let the church transform the world.

This is not merely a matter of what happens in church buildings, but what is done in the rest of the week and in the other places Christians spend their time and energy. For we are to be the church 24 hours a day and seven days a week and everywhere we go. The pressure is on us to conform to our culture, to agree with a majority in our society who think that religious differences are merely a matter of personal opinion and choice. And who think that they don't really have much to do with life.

But the truth is that Christians ought never to fit too well in such sinful cultures as we live in, for the God who gives us life is jealous of anything that would rob us of that life. He is exclusive and demanding for our good, for apart from him we return to the death from which he rescued us. And so He tolerates no other gods; he tolerates nothing less than complete loyalty.

And that's something we can't offer if we undervalue God's call to unity among his people. "United we stand; divided we fall" is a biblical truth. If we would serve the Lord well, we must stand against anything which would dilute our witness and loyalty; we must do it personally, and we must do it together. That is one of the biggest challenges for all who wish to be Christ's disciples.