

# “Unity in Diversity in the Christian Church”

James 3:13-17

11/25/2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

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James is a difficult book of the Bible to study because we don't know the context about which the author was writing. Whenever we study the Bible, or any other document for that matter, to be credible we first try to understand ① the audience to whom the writer was writing, ② their life situation as well as ③ the writer and his or her relationship with the audience. We do know something about what seems intended by the writer but certainly not as much as we'd like.

The probable author was James who was a younger brother of Jesus. He was well known in the early Jewish Christian church. Along with Peter and John, he was one of the first leaders among the Christ-followers according to Corinthians, Galatians and Acts.

There are some interesting legends that circulated about James that appear in speculative writings of the Apocryphal Gospel of the Hebrews.<sup>1</sup> Here, Jesus was said to make a special appearance to His brother James after His resurrection from the dead.

But James did have authority in the early gatherings of the church. When Peter and others left Jerusalem, probably during a persecution, James stayed behind and became their leader. In traditions of the church, he was nick-named “the Just One” or “the Rampart” of the church.



The book of James was written during the final years of his life – between 80 and 100 CE. What complicates our understanding of this writing is that it was not in letter format as were the epistles of Paul. It is a collection of advice which didn't seem to apply to a single audience or even a single set of circumstances. Remember that the collected sermon fragments of Jesus (that we call “the Sermon on the Mount”) also didn't apply to a single audience. It is just that James is a loosely connected batch of advice to Christians

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<sup>1</sup> in the narrative of Hegesippus.

– trying to summarize practical concepts for early believers.



James assumes his readers were relatively poor. They were apparently oppressed and abused by the rich. What he seemed to emphasize most was being pious in their poverty as opposed to being arrogant like those who were wealthy.

The thing is that you can only talk for so long about being poor and pious before people start to question why rich people seem to be living it up and not having any trouble. This is why James resorted to talking about the End Times when these people, who had supposedly ‘made it,’ are going to get what they deserve. James writes about persevering and being patient. Personal piety and patience is the repeating theme of James.

As for what was just read in chapter 3: there were some in his audience who were proud of their “wisdom” or debating skills and were contentious about it. Apparently they were argumentative, jealous, bitter, selfish and boastful. James argues that true wisdom isn't characterized by these negative traits. In fact, James calls the argumentation disorderly and even demonic.

The heresy of *Gnosticism*, which flourished widely in the early churches for several decades, claimed to have a special and secret wisdom handed down to a select few individuals. Most commentators suspect that there were Gnostic Christians in James' audience. Imagine this or any church that had a few people who claimed to have special private knowledge from God that everyone else doesn't have?

James says that true wisdom, on the other hand, comes from God and is pure, peaceful, gentle, friendly and full of compassion. Wisdom plants the seeds of peace. And James continues to use the image of planting seeds (later in chapter 5) when he talks about farmers patiently waiting for their crops to grow. If they wanted to have a “wise” church, they should be treating one another

in peacefulness, gentleness and compassionate friendship.



The Presbyterian denomination, I think more so than most other Protestant forms of work and worship, is a wise and compassionate model. Those of us who serve as ministers do not (or should not) function in positions of power but as teachers. Presbyterians are like the Jesuits of the Protestant faith. The church board, the Session, made up of Elders, runs the church. Clergy don't even vote on matters of the local church.

Presbyterians certainly do not run a perfect church group, as part of the rest of Christian faith expressions around the world, but it works hard to balance its rituals, worship styles, reverence of the scriptures and focus on justice in the church and in society. It is commonly known that Presbyterians are usually the first of the faith expressions to delve into new and immersing social justice issues. The rest of the denominations usually wait to see what Presbyterians do and then begin their struggles later. That's why it is interesting for us to see that a split-off group of the Roman Catholic expression is just getting around to ordaining women as priests.<sup>2</sup>

Unity or Peace does not mean there is no diversity or disagreement. There are a number of disagreements in the Presbyterian church on all levels of its activities. But peace and unity exist when the diversity and disagreements are present.

Many who have invested years of their lives in certain issues are still able to function as brothers and sisters with those who oppose their points of view. Whether you're talking about a committee of the denomination, a committee of a local church Session here or people sitting in the

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<sup>2</sup> As shown by the article in *The Buffalo News* on 11/18/2001 about the ordination of a woman priest by the "Old Roman Catholic" church denomination in Rochester New York.

pews beside one another, there is diversity and yet love between pacifists and those who would argue for a just war. There remains a bond between those who love ritual and regulation and those who want social justice and practical change for the better in people's daily experiences at home and at work.

In any discussion, and the Presbyterians are always and forever voting on things as their way of talking about issues, there is usually a fairness. All sides on issues are heard. After discussions and fair hearings, the majority rules and whether something wins or loses, it is understood that true social change never takes place in just one vote. Someone apply said that no significant social change ever takes place in your own lifetime.



In the November conference on unity in diversity at Westminster Presbyterian church in Buffalo,<sup>3</sup> the keynote speakers were two leaders from the opposite camps on the issue of whether to allow lesbian, gay, bi-sexual or transgendered Presbyterian Christians to serve in ministry leadership. They were Barbara Wheeler, President of Auburn Theological Seminary and Jack Haberer, former chair of the Presbyterian Coalition. Both persons affirmed their absolute commitment to work for their Biblically-based beliefs on the issue. Both speakers spoke, at length, about the diversity in the patterns of faith expression in the Christian Church.

At least five styles of faith expression were described. ① There are people who seek to understand God through **truth-proclaiming and confessions**. ② Some people seek to be religious by knowing more of God in **prayer and piety** and emotional involvement. ③ Some express their faith in trying to lead effectively – becoming highly involved in the **ecclesiastical** (or church administration) activities. ④ The **altruists** seek to serve in mercy, usually getting involved in the doing of service for others. ⑤ The **activist or prophetic** types believe that making society more fair and just is the way that best brings about

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<sup>3</sup> November 9-10, 2001

Christian virtues.<sup>4</sup> **The Presbyterian faith expression contains all of these five types** (as does every other Christian faith expression).

Most people attend a local church that models or articulates the one faith expression type that most closely coincides with their own personal faith expression style (of these five). But when you have denominational gatherings representing leaders from all of **these five types of expression**, you see and feel the diversity. When you have church gatherings which deal with newly emerging issues, sometimes you feel the diversity more than the unity.

Barbara Wheeler suggested three helpful principles for all of us to consider whenever we try to seek unity amidst our diversity.<sup>5</sup> These three understandings apply to any discussion, whether it is in your own household or on the platforms of public education and inquiry. Keep them in mind next time you find yourself in a discussion that focuses upon a disputed issue.



❶ First, know that any pattern or preference for expressing our faith has both **nobility and purity** but also **corruption**. Any side of things can become too rigid so that rules, procedure and tradition can take the place of God. Safety and predictability can keep a lot of life away from us. “God is sometimes found outside the temple, outside the gates, in the hearts of beggars and thieves.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet freedom to cross boundaries can become indulgent. It can be out there not intentionally looking for God, not wanting anyone to tell you anything.

Keep in mind, then, that **while both sides of an issue can be equally motivated and invested to be with and for God, all of our strivings can become a version of our own perception of spirituality that puts our interests over God’s.**

❷ Secondly, **look for what is Godly in the opposing person’s belief.** Stop and slowly honor

and respect the godliness in the their faith and piety. I think this means to treat the other person as if they were your spouse (whom you passionately love and who also happens to have much more in agreement and commitment in their faith in Christ with you than what is disagreed upon). Honor the godliness of other person.

❸ And thirdly, **look for what is defective and self-serving in your own point of view.** To some extent, all of us, individually, are Pharisees. Those who are conservatives thank God that they are not like the liberals. Those who are liberals thank God that they are not like the conservatives. “There is no greater barrier to God’s grace than self-righteousness.”<sup>7</sup>

All of us need wisdom from God to keep working for unity in our lives. It takes a lot of wisdom to keep our self-concepts in tack and to balance it – keeping our self-interests from getting ahead of God’s much wiser plan for healing and change in human faith and experience.

Every day of your life, ask God for wisdom. It is there for the asking and it is that simple.

“My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, Who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.”<sup>8</sup>



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<sup>4</sup> These five elements were elaborated on by Jack Haberer.

<sup>5</sup> She suggested two but actually gave three.

<sup>6</sup> Suggests Barbara Wheeler

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<sup>7</sup> Comments Barbara Wheeler.

<sup>8</sup> James 1:1-5