

PRACTICING BROTHERHOOD IN A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

1 PETER 2:17, 3: 8-9

Introduction:

Tip O'Neal was a skilled and tough politician while he served in the United States House of Representatives. I remember reading the autobiography which he after finished his time as the Speaker of the House. He had come up through the tough prescient Democratic politics of Boston to serve in one of the highest political offices in our country.

He makes a interesting observation concerning politics in his autobiography. He said, based on this experience, "All politics is local." By this he meant that the successful politician never forgets who put him in office, and he never forgets the issues that are important to them. His days will be numbered if he ever forgets.

I want to take his words about politics and put them in our setting, and say, "Ultimately all denominational issues are local." By this I mean that there cannot be an effective national denominational body, or effective state body, without an effective local body. The denomination is no healthier than the local churches that make up the denomination. While no one would contend for a connectionalism between the national, state, and local Baptist body, this does not mean that they are

unrelated. The health of the larger bodies, or lack of it, is a reflection of what is going on locally. I am here to contend that the local association is the place where the skills of working together in a denominational setting are developed; at least this has been true historically.

My title is a reminder that we are required to practice brotherhood today in a hostile environment. Whether you are serving in a small association in a region where Baptist are scattered, or in a section of the south where in some areas we report more Baptist than the census takers report people, the environment in which we work is increasingly a hostile one.

The political climate of the day is generally hostile to evangelical faith. The convictions that we hold in common concerning the Bible, and concerning the place of Jesus Christ in life and salvation, provoke hostility from the political powers that be. They are willing to use those who are less convinced of their faith, but those with deep convictions concerning the truth basis for faith offend them.

The social climate is increasingly hostile. The value system of the world that pushes for tolerance and pluralism is offended by our narrow views on moral and faith issues. They are threatened by our convictions concerning abortion, gambling, and the value of human life, sexual

practices, the permanence of marriage, and a dozen other issues. They view us as a threat to the peace of the community. They are afraid that we will be divisive.

The media, especially at the national level, is definitely hostile. While some of us enjoy a good relationship with the local media, no evangelical seems to enjoy a good relationship with the national media. It is true that they will have a conservative Christian on a talk program for varieties sake, but I never sense that they receive much respect. Their views seem to be treated as out-of-date, representing a day that no longer exists. They seem to be viewed as a threat to the welfare of the community and the nation. They fear that we have a secret plot to stuff our views down their throats.

Unfortunately many of you serve in areas where you work even in a hostile religious environment. You are caught between a liberal religious establishment on one side, and a fringe charismatic crowd on the other side. There does not seem to be a place at the table for someone who embraces the things that you embrace.

If you feel this way about the world in which you serve, don't feel like you are the first person to ever serve in such a situation. Your world is very much like the world in which Christianity was born, and out of

which our New Testament came. Yet you will fail to find in the New Testament any hopeless hand wringing, or despair because of the hostility all around. Instead you will find a strong admonition, especially in this letter from the pen of the chief apostle Peter, to practice the brotherhood. This is my burden today. As I have prayerfully prepared to address you this morning, these words of Peter have become a fire in my bones. I must deliver my soul, find some relief. Cannot the local Baptist association be a place where we learn to practice what we confess?

We do confess a brotherhood. Do we not? At least I confess a brotherhood—that is I confess that I believe most of the Baptist brethren I have met on the journey are members of the family of God. I mean most of those I have known who prefer to be called conservative, and most of those I have known who preferred to be called moderate, and most of those I have known who were uncomfortable with both labels, I would consider to be brothers and sisters in the same family. When you sit down to talk with them about their faith story, or how they came to be in the way, their stories are not that different. They give evidence that they do indeed have the same life in them, and share a

common love for the same Savior---though they do have trouble loving each other.

Brethren, let's pick up the Book the Lord has given to us, and which all of declare to be our guide for faith and practice, and listen to it again. Hear the words of the beloved apostle, "Honor all people. Love the brotherhood." Both of these admonitions call on us to make this a way of life—we are to be continually treating all men with respect, and to continually valuing and loving those who make up the Christian brotherhood.

The second passage from the pen of Peter spells out what this practicing of the brotherhood will look like in real life. "Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing: knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing." Or to hear it in the words of the New International Version, "Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called, so that you may inherit a blessing."

Do you want to protest that these words were concerning life in the local assembly of believers? What evidence do you have for such a claim? Would this mean then that I can practice one kind of brotherhood in the life of the local assembly, but then another when I am away from the local assembly, and when I am relating to brothers and sisters who are members of another local assembly? Surely no one would advocate such an understanding of these words. This is a general epistle; that is, is addressed to believers regardless of the local assembly they attend. These are matters that relate to the larger body, the whole body, the universal body of Christ.

What are the elements involved in practicing brotherhood? Dare we take this list from the pen of Peter, inspired by the all-wise Holy Spirit, as a standard of measurement? While the list may not be exhaustive, it is a least a good place to begin.

I. BY SEEKING UNITY.

The word used by Peter is this admonition means to be of “one mind”. It is a call for harmony based on a common perspective. It is what the early church had in its beginning and it was referred to as being of “one accord.” It is a deep spiritual unity. It is what we have lacked for several years in our national Baptist life.

How do you get to oneness of mind? As a young pastor I was a subscriber to the Christian magazine published by Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse. I was also an admirer of this effective and conservative Presbyterian minister. He enriched my life each week by his expositions of the Word of God over the radio. He was in the more mature years of his ministry.

In his mature years he did something that caught my attention. As a young preacher Dr. Barnhouse had distinguished himself as a defender of the faith. He was well known for his deep convictions concerning the faith and his ability to articulate the faith. He could be blistering in his attack upon those with whom he had disagreements over some point of the faith. But then he began to change. He began a deliberate attempt to sit down with some of the brethren with whom he had disagreements. Instead of discussing the things over which they differed, they would begin exploring the things on which they had a common conviction. Dr. Barnhouse began to discover that in many cases the things he held in common with people he had been attacking was much greater than the points of disagreement. He also began to discover that some of the things over which they differed were not core doctrines at all, but were some of the marginal matters of Christian truth. As he and those he had

been opposing discussed the matters, they found a basis for an oneness of mind about the Lord Jesus and the work of His kingdom.

I do not discount the fact that there are matters of disagreement among us, but I do question how many of them are matters of vital substance. How many of them represent the core of the message we have been given to deliver to the world? How many of them are matters of practice more than of truth? How many of them would represent a different perspective on a worldly matter—such a matters of national politics rather than eternal truth?

I had a helpful experience a few years ago. I made an intentional commitment when I returned to Lubbock as pastor in 1992 that I would be more open to the larger Christian community in Lubbock, that I would attempt to be supportive of anything that happened in our city which lifted up Jesus as Lord, whether it was sponsored by Baptist or not. So when a pastor approached me about sponsoring and participating in a Prayer Summit for pastors, I immediately said, “Yes.” The pastors of our city were invited to join us for three days of fellowship and prayer at a nearby Baptist encampment. Only one other Southern Baptist pastor was bold enough to join me in the venture. Present we had a Presbyterian or two, a couple of Church of Christ

ministers, some Methodist, a Nazarene, a couple of Assembly of God ministers, some independent pastors, some independent Charismatic pastors, and some others. There was also a mixture racially.

Our agenda was simple. Each man was given opportunity to share his faith story, or how he became a follower of Jesus, and a report on what Jesus was doing in his life right now. We shared prayer burdens and entered into seasons of prayer together. We read the Bible, sang hymns—out of the Church of Christ hymnbook—but the same ones we sing at the Baptist church.

We did this for a part of three days. As we did it, you could feel the walls coming down. We might have differences at some points of doctrine, but we were brothers. We were in the family together. We would never see each other in the same way again. We all had points of pain, and burdens to bear. We needed each other. I so bonded with men in that group that if I needed a prayer partner today, I would quickly call some on them—especially one good Church of Christ neighbor.

I wonder what would happen in Baptist life if we have some times together to discuss together what we hold in common? We have allowed separation to come with brethren with whom we share the family of God!

Brethren, as far as I can understand it, this is an imperative. This is not an option. My guess is that if this does not happen in the local association, it will never happen.

II. BY DEVELOPING SYMPATHY.

It is of interest that Peter uses some words that are not found any place else in the New Testament, and this is an example of this. The word translated, “be sympathetic”, is made of two words. There is the word for suffering and the preposition unusually translated “with”. So it can mean to enter into the sufferings of another.

In the technical discussion of this word in Kittel, however, the writer contends for a broader meaning for the word in this context. He suggests that it means “to have an understanding and sympathetic participation in the destiny of others in all situations.” He also suggests that root idea is “fellow-feelings”.

A kindred word is used in Hebrews of the purpose of the incarnation of the Lord Jesus. He came so that he would be a sympathetic High Priest, so that he would understand our struggles and temptations.

Do the pastor’s in your association know each other well enough to sympathize with each other? Do they have “fellow-feelings” for the brethren? Even as I read these words, I am convicted in my spirit. I

wonder how many men I have failed because I was so preoccupied with my own agenda, building my own little corner of the kingdom, that I never entered into their struggles and pains.

My general impression is that our denomination provides no place for us to develop the capacity to understand each other—unless we become a part of a support group after we have been terminated. Then we will do it with a group of strangers at some distant location.

Brethren, we must learn how to practice brotherhood locally, or this denomination is doomed.

III. BY EXPRESSING LOVE.

Peter gives us another compound word. It is the word for a brother, and the word for warm, affectionate love. He puts them together to point us in the direction of practicing brotherhood.

Brothers have the same father and share the same family. This is true in the physical realm, and it is true spiritually in the family of God. I have two brothers and a sister in my physical family—we share the relationship because we have the same mother and the same father. Though our father is now in heaven, we still call Irene, mother. Whenever we get together, especially since we are mature adults, we experience a natural affection for each other. We have warm feelings

for each other. There is nothing that I would not do for one of them, if it were in my power. We are family.

And we are family. Being Baptist does not make us family, but being followers of Jesus does. Anyone who is following Him is a member of my family, and deserves from my family affection.

We make so much of agape love, but this is not agape love. You may have agape love for someone that you do not have warm feelings or affection for, but this love will always be expressive of warm feelings and affections. It is brotherly love.

Why not rename your association the “Philadelphia Baptist Association”? We could do this if we dropped all of the labels that do not belong in the family of God and began to address each other as brother and sister. We are family—we have the same Father. We have a reserved place in the Father’s house. This is part of practicing the brotherhood in a hostile world.

IV. BY DEMONSTRATING TENDERHEARTEDNESS.

This particular word occurs only one other time in the New Testament and is used by Paul in that familiar admonition, “Be ye tenderhearted”.

The background of the word is interesting—it began as a word used of

the stomach, so it meant for a person to be moved from deep within toward the need of another.

Though this word occurs only the one other time in the New Testament Jesus used a kindred word a number of times, and the Gospel writers used this kindred word of Jesus. So in a real sense when we respond to each other with tenderheartedness, we are responding like the Lord Jesus. We are showing compassion.

When was the last time a pastor in your association went through a major crisis? How did the brethren respond to him and his need? Were they there for him? Was it a moral crisis? How did they respond the last time was there was a brother who fell into sin? Was a meaningful attempt made to rescue him? Was an attempt made to save his family from divorce?

My observation is that we deal with brothers who go through a death in their family fairly tenderly, but if a brother slips, we are more likely to ready with verbal bricks to throw at him than we are tender ministry. We are not likely to write much in the sand if the brother is taken in adultery. Yet Peter makes this a primary element in the practice of brotherhood.

V. BY BEING HUMBLE.

The word translated “humble” in the NIV or courteous by the KJV is a rich N. T. word. Both Paul and Peter found in this word what they valued as an essential Christian quality. To get at the heart of the word you need to understand that it is the opposite of something our world values very much. The business world conducts seminars on self-assertion, they encourage you to get ahead in the world by pushing for self. Peter identifies this as a willingness to fill the role of the servant. He admonishes the leaders of the church, “All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’”

Brethren, if we are going to practice brotherhood in this denomination, then at the local level we must develop a generation of young leaders who follow in the footsteps of our Savior who washed feet and made himself the willing servant of all.

I remember a conversation that I had with a young man while I was serving as the President of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. He approached with a question. He asked, “What do you have to do to get an opportunity to be President of the Convention?” He surprised me. Being the president had never been one of my ministerial goals. I had

actually allowed my name to be submitted somewhat reluctantly. I really did not have an satisfying answer for the young man.

I have thought about it some since. I would have an answer for him now, but it would not fit into the denominational climate we have developed today. My path to a leadership was very simple—I learned to serve by filling some difficult positions in my association. As I served there, it brought me into contact with state leaders who in time suggested my name for some responsibility at the state level. At every point I was caught by surprise.

I am not attempting to call attention to my humility—God knows that the moment you realize you have it, you don't. It is so fragile, but it will keep you from pushing your own agenda, and it will give you a readiness to serve others.

VI. BY EXTENDING FORGIVENESS.

The last two qualities in the life of those who are to practice the brotherhood may be the most difficult. It is the nature of our fallen condition that sooner or later we will say the wrong thing, or someone will say the wrong thing to us. Peter puts it like this: “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but blessing.”

Peter must have had had in mind the words of our Lord. He was present the day Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” You will remember that Jesus added, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Before you say it, let me acknowledge it, Jesus is not talking about a brother. You are right—He is talking about a real enemy who would do you harm. But would you not agree that if I am to love some person who hates me and the Lord that I serve, what should my response be to some person who is seeking to love and follow my Lord, but who has offended me? Should I not extend to him the same kindness and forgiveness that God so freely bestowed upon me?

Where do the brethren learn to do this? My guess is that if they do not learn to do this locally, they will never learn it. The local association should be a laboratory in brotherhood, in practicing brotherhood—but it will require forgiveness to make it work.

VII. BY SPEAKING A BLESSING.

Peter puts this last—“but with blessing.” The word means to speak a word of blessing, or a word of praise. However it is not a word of praise

spoken to the Lord, but one spoken about a brother or to a brother. In order to encourage us to do it, Peter adds, “Because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.” To support this even further he quotes from the Psalmist that encourages such a lifestyle.

The meaning of this is not difficult to understand. Brothers should talk to brothers like brothers. Their words to each other must be full of grace and love. They must be words that build up—at least this is the way we have related to each other in our family.

If we have negative or corrective words to speak to each other, we have always been careful to do in a brotherly manner.

I was recently having lunch with a group of ministers. The name of a well-known minister came up, one that has brought reproach on his name and work of the Lord. One of the ministers spoke up quickly to speak words of condemnation about the man. He was caught by surprise when I quietly said, “He is a close friend of mine. I was his pastor while he was in seminary.” The dear brother who has spoken quickly swallowed about three times, and then stammered out some words of explanation. Every word he had said about my friend was true, but my heart was grieved and is still grieved. We were talking about a brother.

I have not always responded that way. I remember a kind rebuke from a beloved leader in Texas one day when the name of a brother whose name had been in the news came up. I popped off with some words of judgment, but the kind leader said to me, “D. L., it will not help him in any way for us to sit here and discuss his problems, will it?” He was right.

Do we dare practice brotherhood at the local level?

What is my burden today? It is simply to encourage every director of missions in this great convention to consider leading the brethren to make this a priority. I do not have the answers about how to do it, but I do have an urgency in my heart that it must be done. Unless we learn how to practice brotherhood, we can forget about kingdom usefulness for this denomination.