

1 Peter 1:22

Incompatibility is a big problem in Christian circles these days. It's rampant in local church life and it's almost a perennial issue in world mission. People just don't get along with one another; all too often, people who are adult in age often act like spoiled children when it comes to sharing together in the wider community of God's people. When they fail to see eye to eye with a brother or a sister they frequently end up squaring their shoulders and engaging in an eyeball to eyeball confrontation. Instead of shaking hands in warm Christian fellowship they end up banging fists on a table or knocking heads together behind closed doors in a committee room. It's what I often call, the porcupine syndrome: the simple fact is, we need one another; the sad reality is, we often end up needling each other. When this kind of appalling and regrettable behaviour is tolerated among the Lord's people, it is in every sense a travesty of true Christian love and, at the same time, it flies in the face of all that Jesus himself taught. Warren Wiersbe offers his insight on the prevailing problem when he writes: 'You would think that those who walk in hope and holiness would be able to walk in harmony, but this is not always true. From God's divine point of view, there is only one body; but what we see with human eyes is a church divided and sometimes at war.' Mr Wiersbe concludes his penetrating analysis with these words: 'There is today a desperate need for spiritual unity.' And I, it has to be said, concur with him on this issue. It goes without saying that the big fisherman-cum-apostle Peter feels exactly the same. So much so, that in a vitally important section of his epistle which stretches from 1:22 down to 2:10, he gives us four vignettes which strategically underpin the unity of the church of Christ. Number one, we are children in the same family, you find that in 1:22-2:3; number two, we are stones in the same building, you find that in 2:4-8; number three, we are priests in the same temple, you find that in 2:5,9; and number four, we are citizens of the same nation, you find that in 2:9,10. It seems to me

that the sheer value of the international community of believers must never be glossed over, it must never be skimmed over as if it didn't really matter. I came across an excellent portrayal of this concept in an article by Stuart Briscoe of Elmbrook Church in Milwaukee; it has been a tremendous help to me for I have for the first time been able to visualise it in my mind's eye. I can see it panning out like this: sometimes the relationship of one believer to another believer is similar to the relationship of pool balls to pool tables. We all have our individual identity, our own little colours, as it were; and we all sit somewhere on the same table. Often we are propelled around the fellowship; we ricochet off the cushions and bang into each other. But as soon as we touch, we use the momentum of our collision to head us off in opposite directions again. This goes on and on until someone slips off into the pocket and we give him a good funeral and say nice things about his life of colourful collision. I can't help but feel, maybe the time has come for us to get to grips with a worsening situation, maybe we all need to realise the huge importance of our interpersonal relationships with regard to our spiritual experience. There is, in the inspired opinion of Peter, clearly a definite link between them, there is a well-earthed connection, whether we appreciate that fact or not! This is no time for ducking and diving! This is not the time for debating theological niceties or pandering to each other's likes. This is not the time for blowing hot and cold air on a matter of such grave importance. We need to come to terms with what Peter is saying for he spells it out in plain layman's language. We all appeal to the same Father in heaven; we have all been born again of the same seed; we have all 'purified ourselves by obeying the truth.' In other words, we enjoy the same life; we accept the same truth which we seek to obey because we know the same Father through the same Son. Because we have all these benefits and blessings in common, it follows that we share the same love, we love the same truth, we love the same Father and Son and we experience the same redemption. You see, it is in the community of this unity that there

is enormous strength to be found. I firmly believe that these are the core values we build on if we are to keep on going when the going gets incredibly tough. The bottom line is, you are in it, I am in it, we're all in it, and we're in it together! In a nutshell, this is Peter's impassioned appeal for unity. The story is told that before Andrew Jackson became the seventh president of the United States, he served as a major general in the Tennessee militia. During the war of 1812 his troops reached an all-time low in morale. As a result they began arguing, bickering, and fighting among themselves. It is reported that Old Hickory called them all together on one occasion when tensions were at their worst and said, 'Gentlemen! Let's remember, the enemy is over there!' That's the gist of what Peter is saying, and it's an appropriate word for the church in the third millennium. We need to stop our infighting, we need to stop our bickering at one another, we need to stop our back-stabbing, we need to stop shooting our wounded soldiers. Sure we do! Now is the opportune moment for us to covenant before the Lord that we will pull for one another, support one another, believe in one another, value one another, affirm one another, encourage one another, care for one another, pray for one another, love one another! The list is endless, it goes on and on and on. The fact is, we're on the same side, we're on the same team, we're in the same family. You know, I think it is relatively easy for us to love the Lord Jesus for all that he is as a person, and we don't have any hangups loving him for all that he has done on our behalf. Apparently, we don't have a problem there! It's not so easy to love other Christians with the John 3:16 brand of love though, that is a different ballgame, yet that is the command we have been given. It's a much tougher assignment to wear the badge of love on the lapel of our lives. As Chuck Swindoll says, 'That compelling mark of the Christian will be a powerful witness to non-Christians. It has nothing to do with talking to the lost about their spiritual condition. It has everything to do with how we treat one another.' When we backtrack and take a moment to eavesdrop on the high priestly

prayer of Jesus in John 17, it is clear that his all-consuming ambition for his people was that they might be united. In verses 20-23, with the cross rapidly approaching, and when his mind could have been occupied with other legitimate things, Jesus was praying for you and for me during those final hours. And not only for us, he was interceding for all those who would ultimately believe on his name. His burning desire was that we might make an impact on the world, that we might influence our generation, because of our unity with him and our oneness with each other. The margin notes of one version, the New American Standard Bible, give this a literal translation which says: 'that they may be perfected into a unit.' The word 'unit' is the key word for that's what shapes everything else. A unit is a team, it's a group of people who are bonded together, people who are totally committed to each other, people who are operating together in a kind of partnership arrangement; if you like, at the risk of sounding rather simplistic, it's you and me tuned in to the same station because we're on the same wavelength. Unity, that factor is what Jesus longs for us to experience in all our relationships. He's not talking about uniformity, but unity; we're not all the same, but we are all one! We don't have to look alike, we don't have to think alike, we don't have to act alike, for we are different, and we're meant to be; we are not spiritual clones! He doesn't even pray for unanimity; as they say, there are more ways to skin a cat than my way! That means: we can disagree, every vote taken doesn't have to be 100 percent in favour of the motion. But, we must be a unit: our eyes on the same goal, our hearts in the same place, our commitment at the same level, our love reaching out to each other. You see, in the best of times, in the worst of times, we stand together, we fall together; it's no big deal what happens to us down here, for come what may, we are in it together and love is the glue that enables us to stick together in the good times as well as in the bad times. These people in Peter's day were going through dangerous times, it was tough, incredibly tough; they were living in extreme and demanding situations. They were

hurting, they were smarting. The problem is, when life begins to take a dramatic downturn it's surprisingly easy to get a little thin on love. It is ironic, I know, but that's precisely what these people needed most. They needed to support each other, they needed to get behind one another, they needed to be there for one another and they needed to be available to each other. That's why Peter says what he does in this kind of fast flowing upbeat pep talk. It's a kind of fatherly chat for Peter assumes the role of a patriarchal figure among them. He pulls out all the stops as he tries his utmost to encourage them to hang in there. The old apostle shows them the prime reason why the Lord has brought them from where they were to where they now are. He explains how they have been liberated from the shackles of their previous life so that they can genuinely uphold each other. I feel in my heart that the message which is emerging from the text is that this can be a healthy experience for all concerned; it is mutual, it is beneficial, it is positive, it is welcome, for when all is done and dusted, Christianity is a two-way relationship.

Peter has said a lot about holiness in his first epistle. I came across a quote fairly recently which had this to say on the subject: 'Holiness flames in devotion to God and in love of the brethren.' To me, that is a crisp summary of Peter's instruction in verse 22. He seriously exhorts us to love one another. As he pleads with us to do it, he shows that what we are to do is grounded in what God has done. God's word renews us, it cleanses us, it matures us for a life of love. You see, love and truth, so often set at odds in contemporary Christianity, are knitted together by Peter. From Peter's perspective, he sees love for fellow-believers as the great mark of true holiness, it is the mark of a saint. As someone has said, 'Peter is not satisfied with tolerance or acceptance, far less with formalised distance. He will have love, sincere love, without pretence or hypocrisy.' But when you unpack what Peter says in verse 22, it is clear that even sincerity is not enough; our love must be 'deep' and

intense. The Greek word which Peter employs is a word that means 'stretched' or 'strained'. The same term is used in Luke 22:44 to describe the full-blown earnestness of Christ's prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. In other words, he gave it all that he had, he held nothing back, he gave it 100 percent, he put his all into it. The love that Peter refers to here is a love that is heartfelt, it has a real depth to it, it has an authentic feel to it, there is nothing superficial about it, it is not skin-deep, it is certainly not synthetic or artificial. This is the real thing! We need to remember that Peter is writing to people in the first century who were divided by the jealousies and hatreds of their past; they were polarised and barely on speaking terms with one another, it's an understatement to say there was no love lost between them. They were living on both sides of the sectarian divide and to all intents and purposes they were as intransigent as they come. Some of them were Jews and some of them were Gentiles. To bind them in family love, Peter directs them in a robust manner to the one source, the only source. You see, the love that joins redeemed hearts together flows from the love of the Redeemer. Edmund Clowney in his commentary has this to say: 'Christian love is the love of grace, it is the love of real compassion. For such love to appear, the pride and selfishness of our alienation from God must be swept away. They must be replaced by a heart made new with the motives of grace.' Peter doesn't leave us in mid-air grasping at straws for he shows us how both needs are to be fully met. It is the 'word of God', it is the good news of the gospel, that is the means both of our new birth and of our nurture in holiness. The logic is this: because God's love is the source of our love, the message of his love is what kindles our love. We can show our love for one another in a million different ways, and all of them are better felt than telt; we can demonstrate our love by a warm embrace, by a big hug, by a holy kiss, or even a helping hand. Having said that, Christian love cannot be transmitted that way. As someone has said, 'Christian love is born as Christians are born: through the truth of the gospel.' That agent which clears away all

the filthy rubbish of the old lifestyle is the cleansing of our souls through obedience to God's revealed truth in Scripture. And that's what happens when we bend the knee at Calvary and recognise Jesus as Saviour and Lord. This obedience to the truth is our initial submission to the claims of the gospel, for in saving faith the truth of God is heard and heeded. It means more, it means that we don't have to look at other people through the distorted lenses of our own biases. So often we can't see the wood for the trees! But when we remove the blinkers of bigotry, we can see people as God sees them and we can love them as he loves them. It's quite amazing, but in a strange and remarkable kind of way, this has a purifying effect on our hearts. It purges us, not only from a limited perspective where we can't see any further than our own nose, but it eliminates and eradicates the likes of prejudice, resentment, hurt feelings, and grudges from our personal agenda. You see, such purity of heart helps us love each other without hypocrisy and with a sincere love. The fact is, it doesn't blind us to each other's faults; it gives us the grace to overlook them. It has to be said, that's where real love wins the day! I am intrigued to read that Peter writes to those who have already experienced that cleansing, he addresses those who already know true brotherly love because they have been purified in heart and mind. Their past has been washed away! The challenge from Peter's pen is for them to deepen their love and for them to strengthen the love they already have. In the same way, Paul urged the Thessalonian believers in his first epistle to love 'more and more' as God has taught them, you find that reference in 4:10. The glue that holds all this together is love, it's the bonding agent. The expression which Peter uses here in verse 22 speaks of a strong, emotional, passionate commitment that is difficult to pick up on in the English. Two Greek words are used predominantly in the New Testament to describe love, and Peter uses both of them here. One is 'philos' which generally refers to a brotherly love or the love of a friend. That is the word he uses in the phrase: 'love for your brothers.' The other is 'agape', a higher form

of love, a more divine type of love, which is the word he uses for 'love one another deeply.' That's an exceptionally high standard he is setting, but nothing less will do, nothing else will suffice! He then intensifies both commands with passionate modifiers as one writer called them: he uses the words 'sincere' and 'deeply' and 'from the heart.' The principle enshrined in the text is that it is of the utmost importance that we share both kinds of love. We share brotherly love because we are brothers and sisters in Christ and have likenesses, we are an integral part of the global family of God, we are members of the international community of God's redeemed people. And we share 'agape' love because we belong to the Lord and therefore we can overlook our many differences. This brand of love is not a slushy gushy feeling in our heart for one another; it is a matter of the will. As I said a few minutes ago, we show love to others when we treat them the same way God treats us. God forgives us, so we forgive others. God is kind to us, so we are kind to others. The best example of all is Jesus, and if we are to be the kind of people God wants us to be, then we do well to follow his example!