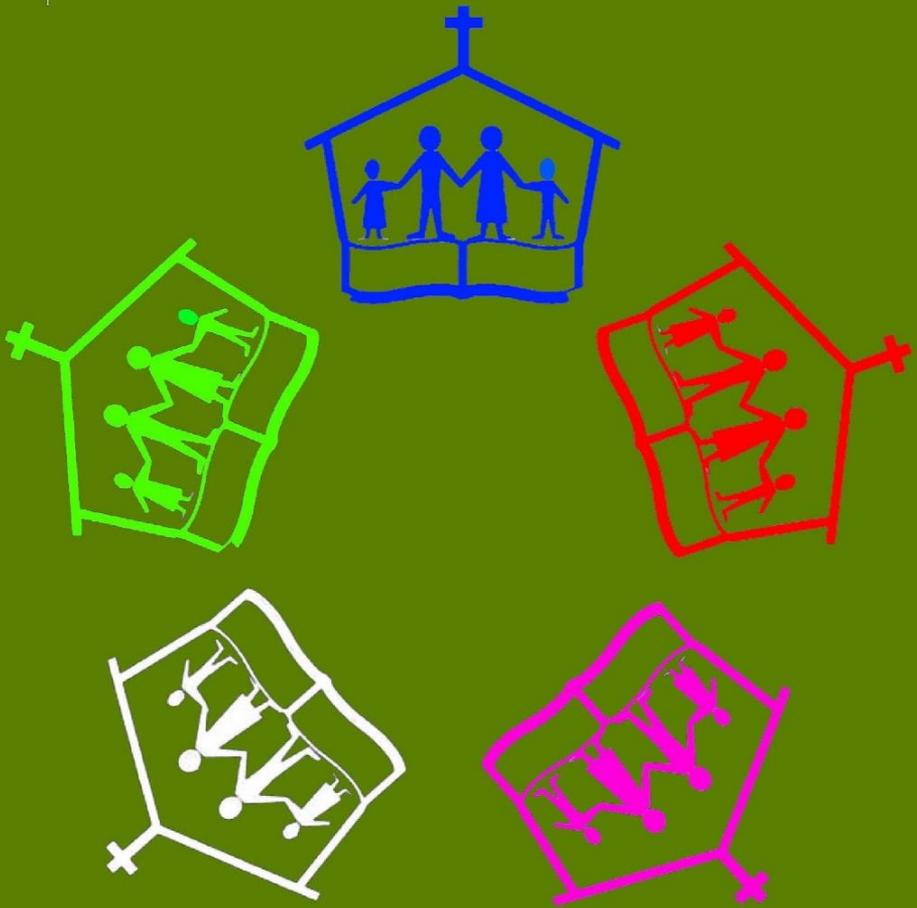


Unity Matters

**Biblical reasons to care
about a united church**



By Dennis Fuqua

Unity Matters

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Published by L/P Press.
Vancouver, WA. USA
www.lppress.net

Printed in the United States of America

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Cover design and publishing assistance by Dan Mayhew
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Unity Matters

How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity.
King David

May they be brought to complete unity. King Jesus

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Preface

I enjoyed pastoring in Gig Harbor, Washington for many years. While there, I became committed to walking in unity with the other believers in the area. This drew me to initiate getting pastors from various streams together to know each other, pray for each other, pray for our area, and present a united front to our community.

While walking into my office after returning from a pastor's meeting where there "should have been more pastors" I groaned to myself "Why do I keep doing this?"

To my surprise, I felt like God answered me. But He did not give me an answer. He simply asked me to take some time and answer my own question, from His perspective.

So, I did. I went into my office and wrote out 7 or 8 Biblical reasons why I wanted to see – and more importantly, why He wanted to see – His Church in my area walk in true unity.

A few months later, I was asked to become the director of International Renewal Ministries. For over a decade, this ministry had been gathering pastors together – across denominational, racial, and generational lines – simply to pray. The prayer resulted in greater relationships in God's family. These multiple-day gatherings were called Pastors Prayer Summits. They began in the Pacific Northwest, but had literally spread around the world.

When it came time to share with my congregation about this move, I used the reasons for unity I had written out as the basis of that message. Over the next few years I added a few more to the list.

This booklet is the compilation of those reasons (plus four other shorter articles). I am sure there are more. My prayer is not so much that these reasons will convince those who aren't convinced, but rather that they will encourage those of us who are.

Why Bother with Unity?

Twenty Biblical Reasons to Care about a United Church

“The church seems so divided today! Wouldn’t it be a lot easier not to worry about all those other churches and just take care of ourselves?” Probably. “Those people are so different from us”. You’re right. “This unity thing takes so much effort”! I know what you mean. “And do you know what they believe over there?” So, why bother with unity? Simply put, because Scripture gives us no other option. Walking in biblical unity with the other members of the Body of Christ in my community is not easy; it takes a very deliberate, intentional decision. Unity requires an investment of time, energy, thought, money and comfort, but the investment pays great dividends!

Why is it valuable to be committed to walk and work with all the other true brothers and sisters in a geographic area? Here are some Scriptural reasons for that commitment:

1. Unity reflects the very nature of God – Deuteronomy 6:4, John 10:30.¹

Deuteronomy 6:4 became a regular proclamation of the people of God in the Old Testament, “Our God is one!” Paul reaffirms this in the New Testament (1 Timothy 2:5), “For there is one God”. Jesus includes Himself in the equation in John 10:30, “I and my Father are one.” Paul tells us there is “one Spirit” in Ephesians 4:4. In the Trinity, there is one God, and three persons.

Since before time began, the very nature of God has reflected a unity within diversity; three beings functioning in perfect relational harmony. Apart from when Jesus became sin for us at the cross, there never was and never will be any disagreement or division within the Godhead. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit always walk in unity. In fact, the universe was in unity until sin came; when sin came, division was the consequence. It is still true today; division and sin go together.

When we experience broken relationships, we are experiencing the universe differently from what God intended. When we experience harmonious relationships, we participate in God’s original intention.

¹ John 10:30 I and the Father are one.

Why care about unity in the Body of Christ? Why walk with others who are obviously part of God’s family yet worship in a different manner? Because disunity reflects the world as the evil one desires it to be and unity reflects God’s essential nature. Let’s walk with God on this one!

2. Unity is a specific answer to Jesus’ prayer – John 17:11, 20-21.²

You know the excitement of being the answer to someone else’s prayer, don’t you? Someone cared deeply about a situation and prayed fervently. Then God worked it out for you to be the one through whom His answer would come. What a joy to know that you were part of the work of God!

Now consider what Jesus prayed for His followers: that they would “be one.” In His intense prayer of John 17, unity is one of the repeated themes. It is not simply that “someone” cared enough about this to pray, it is Jesus Himself who prayed! And we are the ones who get to be part of the answer to His prayer. Why would we let anything get in our way if we knew that we could be part of the answer to Jesus’ prayer? Should our own history get in the way? Our preferred style? What about our denominational allegiances? Nonessential doctrinal issues? The reputation we have sought to build? Should these things stop us from doing all we can to see Jesus’ prayer for unity answered? If being the answer to “someone’s” prayer is exciting, how much more joy and excitement is ours as we are part of the answer to the Savior’s prayer!

3. Unity embodies the essence of the gospel: reconciliation – 2 Corinthians 5:18-21.³

² John 17: 11, 20-21 I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one... 20 “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

³ 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. 20 We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to

“He has committed to us the ministry of reconciliation”. You may recognize this verse from the classic 2 Corinthians 5 passage on the topic of reconciliation. God reconciled us by bringing us back into relationship with Himself. But as soon as we receive that reconciliation, He asks that we not simply enjoy it, but employ it. He tells us that we are His ambassadors who are to enter into that reconciliation process with Him.

He has given us the ministry and the message of reconciliation. This reconciliation has both a vertical and horizontal dimension to it. It is primarily for those outside of God's family who need to be reconciled to Him (vertical reconciliation). But it is also relates to many who are inside God's family who need to be reconciled to one another (horizontal reconciliation)!

Whenever we encourage and serve the process of reconciliation, we are demonstrating the power of the gospel. God has in mind the kind of relationship He wants us to have with one another. Whenever brothers and sisters come back into that God-defined kind of relationship with one another, we are living the power of the gospel. In many different settings, from restaurants to Prayer Summits, God has given us hundreds of opportunities to experience this kind of reconciliation. And each time it happens, we rejoice because God rejoices.

4. Geography is the only point of division Scripture allows in His Church – 1 Corinthians 1:10, 12:25.⁴

If you have a misunderstanding about my bride, I want to correct you; she is important to me, so it matters that you have an accurate understanding of her. You might feel the same way about your own spouse. How much more does Jesus desire that we have an accurate understanding of His bride?

God. 21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:10 I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. 1 Corinthians 12:25 so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.

I believe we use the word “church” in ways that make Jesus raise His eyebrows. We talk about buildings as churches, denominations as churches, or we say there are 15 (or 150 or 1500) churches in our city. We even make up terms like “parachurch”. Each of these usages betrays the fact that we think His Church is something different than God does. We view it differently than He does. We have mentally divided – and therefore practically divided – His Church into pieces He never had in mind.

As we read Scripture, it becomes very clear that Jesus’ perspective of the boundaries of His Church is based around only upon geography (see Revelation 2 &3). Paul also speaks of the Church of cities or regions (large or small), not in terms such as the First Baptist Church, charismatic churches, or the Methodist Church. These are human boundaries. His plea is clear in 1 Corinthians 1:10: “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought”.

In fact, when Paul heard of a group gathering around personality (1 Corinthians 3:1-4) or giftedness (1 Corinthians 12:14-21), he slapped them on their spiritual wrists and told them to stop it!

I believe one of the most exciting and far-reaching things Jesus is doing in His Church today is bringing us back to a geographic understanding of His Church. In no way do I think Jesus is against denominations or that we should merge all the congregations in an area into one big group. But I do believe Jesus wants us to view His bride more the way He does. As we do, we will see ourselves being more open to significant interaction with other true parts of the Body of Christ.

Why is it valuable to be committed to walk with all the other brothers and sisters in a geographic area? Because this is what Jesus is committed to.

5. Unity is God’s will – Ephesians 4:3, 1 Corinthians 1:10.⁵

Right from his conversion on the Damascus road, one of Saul's desires was to know what the Lord wanted him to do (Acts 22:10). One of the

⁵ Ephesians 4:3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 1 Corinthians 1:10 I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.

most common questions pastors receive is, “How do I know God’s will?” I believe this question is one of the earliest evidences that we are really submitted to the Lord. One of the clearest answers to that question involves what God says in His Word. When He gives us a command, we don’t need to wonder about His will.

We don’t have to wonder what God’s will is when it comes to walking in unity with the other members in the Body of Christ. We are not only encouraged to walk in unity, we are commanded to. It is part of the “worthy walk” commanded in Ephesians 4:1-3. We are told that walking worthy of our calling includes humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love, and making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. So, if we want to do God’s will, we will maintain that unity in His Body which the Spirit of God has established. In this Ephesians passage, it is not up to us to establish or make the unity; Jesus has already done this. Our part is to maintain or keep the unity. This is one time when we are supposed to be in a “maintenance mode.” We are supposed to do the 30,000 mile maintenance, the annual maintenance, and even the daily maintenance.

Why are we committed to walking with other members of His Body? Very simply, because it is God’s will.

6. We need unity to survive – Ecclesiastes 4:9-12.⁶

The Columbia Broadcasting System has increased our national interest in surviving. The “real life” show “Survivor” has given us new household names and pulled in great ratings.

But no matter how much they bill this show as “real life”, it just isn’t! I know a bit about real life survival. I have personally been in the spiritual trenches of ministry and have also spent time with many others in those trenches. Vocational ministry is not easy; most have survived, but frankly, some have not survived. Don’t go there unless God specifically calls you. It is too dangerous. And, don’t go there alone. There will be times when someone is overpowered, or someone needs to be defended.

⁶ Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: 10 If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. 11 Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? 12 Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 tells us that these are the times when supportive relationships are not optional; “Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken”. “Survival time” is not the time to try to build supportive relationships, these are the times when we need to cash in on the investment of our previously established relationships. Contrary to what “real life” TV would like us to believe, our survival is not about us winning over others, it is about us winning with others.

Why is it necessary to walk with the other believers in our communities? Because we need one another to survive.

7. We need unity to function as the Body of Christ – 1 Corinthians 12:12-26.⁷

Not only do we need each other to survive, but we need each other to function the way Jesus wants His Body to function. When did it become okay for us to say, “They don’t need me” (1 Corinthians 12:14-20) or “I don’t need them” (1 Corinthians 12:21-26)?

Scripture says we can’t go there! This kind of thinking is directly opposed to the essence of the “body” imagery. Just as my mouth needs my hand when it is thirsty, so also the “Ezra’s” need the “Nehemiah’s”; and the “expressives” need the “reflectives.”

There are two aspects to this thought. Stated in the negative, one aspect speaks to what we are not to say about ourselves, and the other speaks to what we are not to say about others. Paul knew that we have a tendency to think that if we are different from others, we must not be as good as others.

His point is that there must be diversity in the Body or it is not only absurd (“if the whole body were an ear” verse 17), it is completely

⁷ 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 12 Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ... 14-17 14 Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. 15 Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. 16 And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? 19-21 19 If they were all one part, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many parts, but one body. 21 The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!”

ineffective. Because I am different from other parts of the body, I am functionally more valuable to the body, not less valuable. I can do things that others cannot do. I am needed. There are “many parts” (verse 14).

The opposite is also true. Paul knew that we also have a tendency to think that if someone is different from me, they must not be as good as me. So, he states very clearly that all the parts of the Body need each other (1 Corinthians 12:21). I cannot say, “because you are different than I am, I don’t need you.” I must think and say, “I need you”; there is “one body” (1 Corinthians 12:20).

Flowing out of this realization of our functional need for one another comes a wonderful relational requirement: all members of His Body “should have equal concern for each other” (1 Corinthians 12:25). If we are going to function as His Body is designed to function, it will be because we know that we are needed and that we need others.

8. Unity is necessary to display God’s wisdom through the Church to the world – Ephesians 3:10.⁸

God has always desired to bless the world through His people (Genesis 12:1-3). He also wants the world to see His attributes through us.

He is looking for people and places through which He can display His glory and splendor (Isaiah 44:25, 61:3). “His intent was that now, through the Church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms...” (Ephesians 3:10).

We know the value of godly wisdom. Imagine for a minute what it would be like to live in a world where godly wisdom was the rule, not the exception - my, how things would be different! Relationships would be healthy, prison populations would be reduced, frivolous lawsuits would not be filed, and children would be educated rather than neglected or abused. Wouldn’t this be wonderful?

Scripture says that God wants that kind of wisdom to be demonstrated now through His Church. This cannot and will not happen unless the Church walks in a much closer relationship of unity.

God says that we, His Church, are “His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way” (Ephesians 1:23). How much of

⁸ Ephesians 3:10 His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms,

God's wisdom do we presently display? How much does God want to be displayed? As we let God mold us together, there are ways in which we can display His splendor and wisdom that can never be revealed as long as we are apart.

9. Jesus deserves unity – Ephesians 5:25-27, Revelation 19:7⁹ (note: both the “Church” and “Bride” are singular).

His Church is His bride. A friend of mine has said, “Jesus is not a bigamist. He is not going to return for a harem, He is going to return for a bride”.

It's true. From the Bridegroom's perspective, there is only one Church. Since we will be unified then, doesn't Jesus desire a unified bride now? Since Jesus died to have the dividing wall removed (Ephesians 2:14-17), doesn't He deserve to have us live as though it is removed? Since He prayed that we would be one (John 17:11, 20-23), doesn't He long for an answer to that prayer? Since there is only one Lord (Ephesians 4:5), doesn't He deserve a united team of servants?

Revelation 19:7 says that “the bride has made herself ready.” Part of the preparation process (that will eventually be completed) is to be taking place now.

Apart from the many functional benefits of His Church being unified, isn't the fact that He deserves a unified Church enough, in and of itself?

10. God blesses those who walk in unity – Psalm 133.

Many are familiar with this wonderful Psalm and the promise of blessing described in it. Read it again. “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount

⁹ Ephesians 5:25-27 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. Revelation 19:7 Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.

Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore” (Psalm 133).

Four brief comments about this Psalm: 1) Unity produces anointing. The oil upon Aaron was that which symbolized the presence and activity of the Spirit of God. There is an anointing of His Spirit that runs down upon us when we walk in unity. 2) Unity produces provision. The dew upon Mt. Hermon was part of what made the land fertile and productive. There is a special provision that God gives to His Church when it walks together in unity. 3) Unity is to flow from the top down. Both the oil and the dew naturally flowed downward. There is a responsibility upon leaders today to both catch the flow and not to hinder the flow of this unity. 4) Unity results in the blessing of people experiencing eternal life. Just as in Jesus’ prayer in John 17 (see #12 below) here unity in the Body of Christ is God’s method for effective evangelism.

Oh, it is good when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity!

11. Unity is essential for our maturity – 1 Corinthians 3:1-4, Colossians 2:2-3.¹⁰

We are quite familiar with the promise of blessing in Psalm 133 directed to those who will “dwell together in unity”, but there is another wonderful blessing with which we are not as familiar.

In the straightforward passage of 1 Corinthians 3:1-4, Paul uses some rather strong words for those who are saying, “I follow Paul” or “I follow Apollos.” He refers to them as “not spiritual...worldly...mere infants in Christ who need milk, not solid food.” Here, Paul links our level of maturity – or actually our level of immaturity – with our level of unity. He says there is “solid food” that will help us grow up in Christ, that is available to those who walk in unity.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. 2 I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. 3 You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? 4 For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere human beings? Colossians 2:2-3 My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

In a more mild, but just as serious passage (Colossians 2:1-3), Paul says he is struggling to see the Colossians “united in love.” Then he gives his reason for this struggle, “...so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely Christ.

Paul says we can’t know all of Christ unless we are united in love to the other members of His Body. Jesus has not revealed all of Himself to any one group.

He has arranged it so that if we are going to know more of Him, we will need to know more of one another. Our own maturity, our ability to know more of Jesus Christ, is connected to our commitment to walk in unity.

12. Unity is God’s method of effective evangelism – John 17:22-23.¹¹

When we think of evangelism, things that come to mind are often tracts, programs, books, concerts, preaching, altar calls and TV programs. But when God thinks of evangelism, He thinks of relationships. He thinks of a loving community, unity in His family, and peace. Though there is a very valid place for the former list, we must not forget the latter!

The wonderful and familiar prayer of Jesus in John 17 emphasizes two results of our unity. The first is spoken about the most. When we walk in unity, Jesus says that the world will know that He was sent by the Father (verse 21, 23). The second result is that they will know that the Father loves them (verse 23).

Not only will a united Church validate the origin of Jesus’ trip to earth, it will also demonstrate the reason for it. Evidently, the way it works is something like this: the world can’t or doesn’t see God so they don’t know of His love for them. But when the world sees His people in action, His Body walking in unity with one another and loving one another, they begin to see that divine love is a real possibility. And when people become aware of God’s love, it draws them right into His arms!

¹¹ John 17:22-23 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— 23 I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

13. Unity is what Jesus is doing today – Matthew 11:15 and many other references.

At least 14 times in the New Testament, Jesus is quoted as saying, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” The Lord of the Church wants His Church to keep current with Him. His message is changeless, but it is not static. There are times when He emphasizes a specific truth for a period of time. The reformation truths, the missionary thrust, and the emphasis on worship are some of these examples.

One of the truths He is emphasizing today is the value of unity in His Body; a theme that has sprung up in many different places through many different voices. As one man has said, there seems to be a “reformation of relationships” taking place in His Church. In 1990, cross-denominational pastors’ prayer groups were rare in a city; a few years later, it was rare not to find one in a city. The same could be said for citywide gatherings of worship and/or prayer: The National Day of Prayer, the March for Jesus (Jesus’ Day), Promise Keepers, and Pastor Prayer Summits have all been used by God to help develop unity in the Church.

As Dr. Joe Aldrich, founder of the Pastors’ Prayer Summits, has said, “Find out how life works and get on the good side of it”. When Jesus speaks to His Church by His Spirit about being unified, it is right and good for His Body to hear and respond.

14. Unity is a means of grace – Philippians 2:2-4, James 4:6.¹²

A wonderful definition of biblical unity is found in Philippians 2:2. Paul writes, “make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.” Like-minded, loving one another, united in spirit and purpose; this sounds like the kind of group I’d like to be a part of! Philippians 2:2 illustrates a level of unity that the Church of Jesus Christ has not often experienced, but it is what we are called to.

¹² Philippians 2:2-4 ...then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. James 4:6 But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.”

How do we develop and grow in this kind of unity? Verses 3-4 provide the answer: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” Paul’s answer to our question about developing unity is worth genuine consideration. Unity is developed only through humility. If we are going to be united, it will be because we humble ourselves.

Humble people are the only ones who are willing to be “likeminded” with people with whom it seems they have more things uncommon than common. Humble people are those who can love the unlovely and whose spirits can be brought together to share a purpose that may be different than their own.

Why can they do this? Because “God gives grace to the humble.” Grace to a relationship is like oil to an engine; all the other parts can be there and in place, but without oil, it is a short trip! I believe that the “relational breakdowns” we often experience are primarily because we do not have sufficient grace in our relational engines. If we want more unity, we need more grace. If we want more grace, we must humble ourselves.

Why walk together? The humble walk in unity. God gives grace to the humble. Walking in unity is a means of grace.

15. Our unity is consistent with reality. The truth is that we are really united – Ephesians 4:4.¹³

A definition of insanity I heard a long time ago is “consciously acting inconsistently with reality.” I have to confess that this definition haunts me every now and then. If I ignore the way things really are just because I don’t want them to be that way, and act as though they are not the way they actually are, I need to analyze my mental state.

It is very clear that Scripture tells us the way things really are. One of the “main and plain” things in Scripture is that there is only “one Body” (Ephesians 4:4).

Corresponding to this is the geographical boundary of His Church, rather than personality, gifting, etc. When we act as though there are divisions in the Body that are not actually there, or when we act as

¹³ Ephesians 4:4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called;

though the Body of Christ is not actually “one,” we are acting inconsistent with reality. We must not let our history or the way things look get in our way of understanding the truth of Christ’s one Body. If we don’t recognize that those true believers in the congregation across the street (or in another neighborhood of our city) are really part of us, we are not living consistently with the unity Jesus has already established. Acting consistently with the way things really are is always more productive than acting inconsistently with them.

Why be intentional and deliberate in walking with other parts of the Body of Christ? Because in reality we are already one with them.

16. Each believer is “in Christ” – John 14:20, Galatians 2:20.¹⁴

Let’s be mice in the corner of the “upper room” as Jesus is helping the disciples “cram for the final” in John 14-16. Jesus is saying some very strange things! The disciples at least seem to understand some of what He is saying until Jesus explains He is going to leave them soon and go to the Father. They aren’t really sure how to respond. Notice John’s expression when Jesus says it is good for them that He leaves. What? How could that possibly be? How could anything be better than “hanging out with God” for three years? Can you perceive Matthew’s wrinkled eyebrows and the queried looks on the faces of Peter and James?

We can now reflect upon what Jesus meant by that strange statement. What is actually better than being with God in human flesh? How about having God in us! This is the wonderful truth of Galatians 2:20 and many other related Scriptures.

Unlike the Old Testament when God was “with us,” or the Gospels when Jesus was “among us,” God now resides “in” every believer in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit (John 14:17).

How does this concept relate to walking in unity with other believers in Jesus? Every time we walk with other believers, we have an opportunity to experience more of God through them. And every time

¹⁴ John 14:20 On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Galatians 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

we refuse to walk with other believers or reject them, we are refusing and rejecting more contact with Jesus Himself.

Why work toward unity in His Body? Because God is not separated from the believers we are separated from. When we fail to intentionally interact with certain portions of the Body of Christ, we are not only judging Someone else's servant (Romans 14:4), we are also judging God in that servant.

17. We can glorify Him together in ways we can't when we are apart – Romans 15:6-7.¹⁵

In music, dissonance is generally used to make the resolve to harmony sound better. When all you hear is dissonance, it's hard on the ears. Harmony attracts us, draws us in, and simply sounds better.

Paul prays in Romans 15 that God would give us a spirit of unity, "...so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ".

Notice that Paul does not just desire that we would be one in heart, which is too nebulous for Paul, he wants us to be more practical than that. His desire is that the Church, having become one in heart, would also use "one mouth" to bring praise to God. How can we do that if there is not some time when we are actually together speaking or singing? The next verse states that this praise comes about because each of us accepts one another as Jesus has accepted us. That is a high standard which demonstrates just how serious this is to Him.

The result of His unified Body coming together in heart and mouth is that He is glorified. It is not the volume that brings Him glory – He doesn't get more excited about 120 decibels than He does about 65 decibels - it is the harmony that excites Him. Harmony glorifies God more than dissonance; our united voice is evidence of our united hearts. If every denomination and each congregation is singing a perfectly good tune but out of tune with the others around them, it attracts neither Jesus nor the world.

Why work to walk together? Because every time we resolve the dissonance and demonstrate the unity of our hearts and voices, Jesus

¹⁵ Romans 15:6-7 ...so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

leans over the railing of heaven, listens more closely, and gets the Father's attention. Perhaps the dissonance has had a purpose, but when the resolve comes, the harmony sure sounds good!

When Jesus has leaned forward in His chair to listen to the music of His Church, for too long all He has heard is dissonance; it's time He hears harmony.

18. Unity demonstrates the worth of the Gospel – Philippians 1:27¹⁶

How much is the Gospel worth to you? How much is it worth to the average nonbeliever in your community? Is there anything we who follow Jesus can do to increase its worth to those who are not yet following Jesus?

It is well recognized that “joy” is a clear theme in Philippians. The theme of “unity in Christ” becomes clear only as we look a bit more closely at the book. The first command of Paul in this book comes in 1:27 when he tells his readers, “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ.” He goes on to tie the worth of the Gospel to their willingness and capacity to “stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the Gospel.”

In this key part of the flow of his book, Paul makes it clear that there is an inseparable link between the worth of the Gospel and the unity of the saints. If we don't “stand firm in one spirit,” the Gospel loses some of its worth. The first two words of this verse, “whatever happens,” are very applicable to the 21st century. Much has and does happen to keep us apart. But Paul commands us to keep walking together no matter what happens.

Finally, he tells us that a demonstrated unity will allow them to face opposition without being afraid, which then becomes “a sign to them that they will be destroyed but that you will be saved.”

To the Saints, the worth of the Gospel will always be immeasurable. To those who are not yet following Jesus, it is very measurable. It is measured by the depth of our commitment to walk together “whatever happens.”

¹⁶ Philippians 1:27 Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel...

19. A lack of unity produces a sick and dying Church – 1 Corinthians 11:27-30.¹⁷

We know the importance of examination prior to approaching the Lord's Table. How important it is to use the Lord's Table as a regular check-up of how we are to continually live in the shadow of Calvary. What weakness, sickness, and even death that has come upon the Church because of a lack of serious examination!

But, the examination Paul mentions regarding the communion table is not simply a general examination about our sin or our standing with Jesus. It is a very specific kind of examination. He says, "A man ought to examine himself before he eats the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the Body of our Lord eats and drinks judgment upon himself" (1 Corinthians 11:28-29).

The specific issue the Spirit of God is calling us to examine on a regular basis is this: do we "recognize the Body of the Lord?" Paul is very consistent with this metaphor. When he refers to the Body of the Lord, he is referring to the Church. In the previous chapter (10:16), Paul links the bread and the Body together when he asks, "And is not the bread we break a participation in the Body of Christ?"

In the human realm, when one part of our body does not recognize another part of the body, something bad is going to happen; a cut, a fall, a hit, or something. This is amplified when we think of Jesus' Body. If I say, "that hand is not part of the Body, I can cut it off without any harm to me," the Body is weaker. If someone says, "this immune system must belong to someone else," the Body is sicker. And if we say, "that heart isn't mine, why should I care," the Body dies.

How much stronger, healthier, and much more alive the Body of Christ would be in each of our communities if every believer would regularly examine themselves regarding the true nature of the Church!

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:27-30 So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.²⁸ Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹ For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. ³⁰ That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.

20. Unity so frustrates and annoys Satan – 1 John 3:8.¹⁸

Remember Colossians 2:15? This is the passage that speaks about Jesus making a “public spectacle” of His enemies at His crucifixion. What a cool thing!

I love it when the evil one gets frustrated or embarrassed. We know from his track record, that Satan likes to break and divide things. He did it in heaven, in the garden, with the nation of Israel, with the New Testament Church and throughout its history. When things that are supposed to be united are divided, Satan is not far away (John 10:10). One of the reasons I am committed to walk together with all the other true believers in my city is because when I do, I join together with Jesus and “destroy” more of the devil’s division (1 John 3:8).

Before I was in His family, I had no capacity to help the devil’s work be destroyed. In eternity, he will be well taken care of. It is only during this temporal part of my life that I can join with Jesus in this process.

Why work for unity? Why walk with all of God’s family? Because I want to take every opportunity I can to see the evil one be frustrated, annoyed, and defeated!

Is this an easy task? A smooth process? No. Calling His true Body to true unity is not easy and it is often a slow process, but it always pays great dividends. Let us continue to press forward!

¹⁸ 1 John 3:8 The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.

Understanding Christian Unity

Initial thoughts from Nate Baxter. Developed by Dennis Fuqua

There are several sub-Christian notions of unity that affect our thinking. If we are going to grasp Biblical unity, it is helpful to understand what it is not, as well as what it is.

Four things Christian unity is Not...

- 1) The Borg (A Star Trek illustration of a machine that will assimilate all who do not submit) – Forced uniformity. Unity is not forcing others into our ideas or plans. It is not forced conformity. This violates the metaphor of a “body.”
- 2) Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood – A no conflict zone where “predictable problems are set up and resolved in 29 minutes.” Unity does not pretend there are no differences or disagreements. Instead, it works through these things.
- 3) A Barn-raising – Cooperation of the neighbors who come and help raise the barn for a day or two, then go back to their own ranches. Though cooperation is part of Biblical unity, it is something far deeper than working together on projects.
- 4) A Great Corporate Methodology – A good marketing plan that results in greater kingdom sales. Another church growth method we may try but discard if it does not work. Unity is not something we try and give up on if it “doesn’t work.” It is something we live in whether it works or not.

Four essential elements of Christian unity

- 1) Unity is a gift from God to us. It originates with Him, not with us. It is given from Him to us (Eph 4:3) From John 17 we see that Unity has its origin in the Trinity. See also, Rom 15 5-6.
- 2) Unity is a state of being, or condition, not simply an activity.
- 3) Unity is based on “sameness” – John 17:10, Phil 2:2. This does not mean we are all the same, but rather that we recognize the amount of “sameness” we have in Jesus.
- 4) We will never walk in unity with those lesser than God until we have walked in unity with God. Our unity with others is possible and based upon the fact that the Father and the Son are united.

Four observations from John 17

- 1) Unity requires distinct beings (17:21) – One unit cannot have unity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct beings. Unity can't happen without distinction of personality.
- 2) Unity requires mutual indwelling (17:21) – Though we cannot fully comprehend the nature of each member of the Trinity being “in” one another, nor the nature of Christ “in” us and us “in” Christ, it is nonetheless an essential aspect of Biblical unity. This is the “just as” part of our unity with one another. We cannot be “in” one another, but as each of us are “in” Christ, we experience a mutually indwelling.
- 3) Unity develops from a recognition of Glory (17:22 – See also Ps 26:8) – Jesus has given us the glory the Father gave Him *so that* we would be one. It will help us here to think of glory as “impressive value” – as noticing the value of someone or something to the point of being impressed with them or it.
- 4) Unity requires *agape* – (17:24) This is the very nature of the Trinity. It is our awareness of His love for us that allows us to love Him and others. (See 1 John 4:19)

So what is Christian unity?

I suggest it is... the state of distinct individuals making the relationship and the beauty of the triune God visible through their interaction of mutual love.

The Process of Growing in Unity

Initial thoughts by Dave Halbert. Developed by Dennis Fuqua

Unity does not happen with a toggle switch. It is more analogue than digital. In fact, even when we are committed to the value of unity in the body of Christ, it doesn't happen easily, quickly or automatically. Unity is a process. It takes time, commitment and work to build it and maintain it.

Failure to understanding that it is a process can lead to discouragement. Understanding some basic stages of how unity is developed can help us get there better. The following stages describe and clarify the process of growing in unity. I call them the "Uni-Ts".

Uni-T 1 – Truce

Having been in competition with one another, claiming to be right, critical of one another and in a variety of ways shooting at one another, we decide to call a truce and lay our weapons down. When that happens, it feels so good we sometimes call it unity when in fact it is just a truce.

Uni-T 2 - Tolerance

Having called a truce, at some point, we decide to tolerate one another. We may come together to work on a project and then after the project is over we return to our own domain. While we are working together with a common goal in mind, we often say we have unity. However, we probably have come together around the project within the framework of an organizational structure without really developing meaningful relationships. We may also meet together in the context of ministerial meetings, and yet we don't really trust one another or enjoy being together as friends.

Uni-T 3 - Togetherness

This is when we decide to spend enough time together to get to know one another, and relationships begin to develop. We come to realize we really can enjoy being together. We can be friends and don't have to feel threatened by one another. We are all serving under the same Chief Shepherd. We aren't in competition after all! We can cooperate together.

Uni-T 4 - Trust

As we get to know one another, we learn to trust one another. We need to connect heart to heart in order for trust to develop. This often happens as we pray together and hear each other's heart before God. We come to realize we are family!! At this point we discover an unconditional love for one another begins to take root and grow. We find ourselves wanting to support and encourage one another.

Uni-T 5 - Team

At some point we recognize we can actually be a team and function in harmonious relationships. We can be who God intended His Church to be in our communities. We become committed to one another in Christ and develop a kingdom perspective in terms of ministry. We develop a desire to work together as a team to advance the kingdom of God, following His leadership.

Uni-T 6 - Test

As we begin to work together, someone is going to do something that could be offensive. They will do something in a way that I would not do it. They will say something differently than the way I would say it. They will make a decision without asking me (!). It is not "if" this test will come, it is "when" the test will come. When we are aware that these tests will happen, we can use them as opportunities to build and strengthen our relationships rather than to be offended.

Uni-T 7 - Truth

As we are being tested, we need something to keep us from giving up. We need a good reason to stand firm in the midst of the test. In some manner the Spirit of God comes and shows us that we really have no other options! He comes and convinces us of some of the Scriptural reasons to work for unity.

Uni-T 8 - Tenacity

At this point we will become tenacious in our relationships, which are very fragile. We are forged together in Christ through prayer and that must be ongoing. The greatest test of our relationship comes when we move toward strategies or tactics. We need to "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." (Eph. 4:3)

Healthy, secure relationships provide the environment for God to move in a mighty way through His Church.

Uni-T 9 - Triumph

As we come together in unity with strong relationships, a deep sense of trust and are committed to each other in love, we will be able to move forward as the answer to Jesus' prayer in John 17 and He will lead us in triumph in our communities.

Uni-T 10 - Transformation

Finally, as we continue to walk in everything that got us this far, we can anticipate God working through us to the point where He will transform our communities because He has transformed us! Much more of His glory will be seen around us than is presently being seen.

As we value unity and commit to the process of unity we will see Jesus' prayer be answered more and more and see our communities be more transformed!

The Standard and Path to Unity

One of the wonderful themes throughout the Church of Jesus Christ today is the value of unity. Followers of Jesus throughout the nation and the world are not only noticing but embracing passages like Jesus' prayer in John 17 (that His followers would be one so that none believers would be won) and the promise of Psalm 133 (that our unity releases God's blessings). How good and pleasant it is to see this taking stronger and stronger root in His Body!

But, as good as it is to see this, I have a concern. My concern is that we have tasted the hors d'oeuvres of unity and thought it was the main course. We have stopped lobbing hand grenades at one another and thought it was real, Biblical unity. My concern is that we have settled for a unity that is not as deep as the Biblical standard.

This concern has caused me to ask two questions and look more deeply at two sections of Scripture. The first question is "What is the Biblical standard of unity we should be working toward?" The second question is "What is the Biblical route to get there?" The two Scriptures which help answer these two questions are John 17:21-22 and Galatians 2:6-10. Let's begin to answer these two questions.

What is the Biblical standard for unity? Three times in Jesus' John 17 prayer, He states that the standard is the relationship between Himself and His Father (vv.11, 21 & 22). The standard of unity Jesus prayed for His church is nothing less than Trinitarian unity! By this, I do not mean theology agreement about the trinity, but rather a unity that reflects the very nature of the trinity. Now there is a standard that should keep us challenged!

Until we relate to the different people in the Body of Christ like the Father and the Son relate, until we love one another like the Father and Son do, until we honor and respect our different roles and callings like the Father and Son do, until we act like we are "in" one another like they are, we still have more room to grow in unity.

How do we get there? How do we reach such a standard? Isn't that too high and aren't we too far away? The situation of Galatians two was just as volatile as any situation the Church has faced since. All of the things that separate us today are seen in this short little exchange.

There was a deep ethnic/racial divide. Jews and Gentiles had just as much reason to hate one another as any two groups today. The Jews had a “corner” on the God market. They knew it; the Gentiles knew it. The Gentiles were “dogs” to the Jews. The racial issue in Galatians two was “Can members of any race besides the Jews actually be saved?” Or, was Christianity for the Jews only or also for the Gentiles?

There was also a serious theological issue. If we think that the Charismatic issue, or the mode and meaning of baptism, or the Calvin/Arminian debate is a divide, the issue they faced was the very essence of the Gospel! The issue of the necessity of circumcision had far reaching consequences. Was the message of the Gospel about Jesus *period*, or about Jesus *plus*?

Finally, there was a real leadership issue. How and by whom were decisions going to be made? Was Peter, the leader of “the Twelve” in charge or was Paul, the one who received a direct calling and instruction from the resurrected Lord going to be in charge? Were decisions to be made by one person, by the entire group, or by a select group? This makes our issues of polity look rather small in comparison.

The risk of division we find in Galatians two was very real and very great! If the enemy could divide the infant Church, his work would be easy for years to come!

Yet, in the end, this situation was resolved well. What did they know about unity that we could glean from?

Look at Galatians 2:6-10. 1) They did not judge by external appearances. 2) They looked at the task God had given *to* one another. 3) They looked at the work of God accomplished *through* one another. 4) They looked for the grace of God *upon* one another. And 5) they did this without consideration of the personality of one another, or how much they liked one another.

Each of these point deserve fuller consideration. To the degree we implement them in our setting, to that same degree we will walk God’s path toward genuine, Biblical unity.

If we are going to see God’s work accomplished in our day, it will be because we grow in unity. If we are going to grow in unity, it will be because we understand His standard of unity and walk the path the early church walked in Galatians 2.

Four Stages of Unity

As we become the united church in a community we will move through four stages with one another.

1) From not knowing to knowing one another

We can't walk together with people we don't know at all. The first stage of walking in unity is to simply get to know one another. This can happen intentionally or it can happen spontaneously. But if we don't know one another, we are not walking in unity with them.

2) From knowing to loving one another

We may think loving one another is the highest form of unity. But that is not necessarily the case. We are commanded to love - everyone. Love is a choice to give of myself for the highest good of another person. It is to live like Jesus. This is "entry level" unity.

3) From loving to liking one another

Another stage of unity is when we move from knowing and loving one another to actually liking one another. As we interact, we find that our common goal and our common love turns into actually enjoying the other person and the process. This is more than the command to love. This is liking the other person with all the similarities and differences they bring to the table.

4) From liking to needing one another

But there is a greater level of unity than just knowing, loving, or liking. That is when we recognize that we need one another. 1 Corinthians 12:14-27 (see Why Bother with Unity – point 7) makes it clear that we are not to say to (or think about) the other members of the Body of Christ that we don't need them. When we get to the stage of recognizing that all the members of the Body of Christ are necessary, we are at the place where we can most effectively advance God's kingdom together.

Books by Dennis Fuqua - Available at www.lppress.net

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