

COMMUNITY - UNITY

In the late 1800's there were two deacons in a small Baptist church in Mayfield, KY that didn't get along well. These two deacons were always opposing each other in any decision related to the church. On a particular Sunday, one deacon arrived at church to discover that a small wooden peg had been inserted in the back wall (by his adversary) so the minister could hang up his hat. When the deacon discovered the peg, he was outraged that he had not been consulted. People in the church took sides and eventually there was a church split. To this day, they say you can find in Mayfield, KY the "Anti-Peg" Baptist Church.

One of the saddest things that can happen in a church is when people begin to fight against each other instead of working together. Yet it happens all the time. History is full of sad stories about Christians fighting among themselves. Let me share another that I recently read about.

Tradition claims that Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulcher is built over the cave where Jesus Christ was buried for 3 days in about 33A.D. In July 2002 the church became the scene of ugly fighting between the monks who ran it. It turns out that Ethiopian and Coptic Christian monks have been arguing over the rooftop of the church since the 1752 Ottoman Edict that declared which parts of the church belonged to each of six different "Christian" groups.

The rooftop had been controlled by the Ethiopians, but they lost control to the Coptic monks when they were hit by a disease epidemic in the 1800's. Then in the 1970's the Ethiopians regained control when the Coptic monks were absent for a short period of time.

The Ethiopians have been squatting there (on the roof of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher) ever since with at least one monk always remaining on the roof to assert their rights. But in response to this, a Coptic monk has also been living on the roof to maintain the Coptic claim to the church's roof.

Thus, in July 2002, when the Coptic monk on the roof moved his chair into the shade where the Ethiopian monk was sitting, harsh words led to pushing and shoving and then to an all-out brawl. 11 monks were injured, including one who was taken to the hospital unconscious. Amazingly, all this took place in a church that is supposedly built on the same location of Jesus' tomb.

Is it any wonder the world looks aghast at what has become of the Christian Church? When the church is divided it produces some very tragic results. On the other hand, when the church is unified it unleashes a power that can hardly be stopped.

Reminds me of another story. A man was discovered on a deserted island after being stranded there for 15 years. Before they shoved off, he invited his rescuer to tour the island to see what he had been doing for the past 15 years. They made their way to a clearing where 3 thatch-roofed buildings sat in a row. The islander mentioned that the middle building was his house, where he lived, and the building on the right was his church, where he worshiped. After a short pause the rescuer asked: "what's that building on the other side of your house?" "Oh, that's where I used to go to church!" Silly, but remarkably sad, and unfortunately altogether too true!

In the book of Ephesians, more than any of Paul's other letters; he calls the church to be unified. Paul mentions the unity of the church 18 times in Ephesians. If you read through the entire book you'll begin to think Paul is repeating himself. And you'd be right. He is. Both Paul and Jesus agree on this: unity in the church is not just a good thing. Unity is essential. Here's what Paul writes:

Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace.

For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father, who is over all and in all and living through all.

However, he has given each one of us a special gift through the generosity of Christ...Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do His work and build up the church, the body of Christ.

This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. Eph. 4: 1-7 & 11-13

Unity is defined in these verses in 4 distinct ways. Let me share them with you.

1. CHRISTIAN UNITY DERIVES FROM INDIVIDUAL CHRISTIAN CHARACTER

Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Vs. 2

Paul begins this appeal for unity by noting that our discipleship is to 'measure up' to the standard of Jesus Christ. Our discipleship is to be 'worthy' of the standard of Jesus Christ. As difficult as that might at first glance seem, it is followed with 5 concrete commands for specific Christian behavior toward one another. Note these 5 things:

a-humility, b-gentleness, c-patience, d-tolerance toward others faults, e-love. It is no accident he begins with humility and ends with love. All the middle ones are important too, but these two bookends create and hold together any authentic expressions of unity.

Humility is defined here by a Greek word meaning to think honestly and soberly of yourself, and highly of other people. The model is Jesus humbling himself to become one of us humans. Gentleness is sometimes translated meekness, and has the sense of strength under control. Patience is an amazing virtue in dealing with different people and different opinions.

Making allowance for others faults is sometimes translated 'tolerance', but it has no sense of our modern cultural interpretation of "anything goes, if it's wrong for you doesn't mean its wrong for me. Biblical tolerance has to do with tolerating people's struggles with sin and holiness. The last is love, and is obviously modeled by Jesus.

These unifying characteristics were also modeled by a man named, Harold Henry Reese. Back in 1940 Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier becoming the first black baseball player to play in the Major Leagues. He was signed by the Brooklyn Dodgers, and harassed almost everywhere he went, even in his home park. The heckling and ridicule grew almost daily as the season wore on, and came to a dramatic head when Jackie returned to his home town of Louisville, KY. Jackie was playing second base when he made an error on a difficult ball hit his direction. The crowd erupted like nothing he had heard before. Racial slurs, cursing, jeering and insults were hurled onto Mr. Robinson. As Robinson slumped with his head in his hands, he shortly after felt the hand of another on his shoulder; a teammate's embrace lifted his head, and quieted the crowd. For almost 5 minutes Harold Reese, the team captain, stood next to his only black teammate, and displayed an amazing act of unity. Harold is better known as Pee Wee, Reese! Never again will the number 42 grace the back of any Major League Baseball player, because of the efforts of one Jackie Robinson to break through. And no one but those two will ever know the effect of that one hug, in making it happen!

Character is a key component in maintaining unity

2. CHRISTIAN UNITY ARISES FROM GOD'S INHERENT UNITY

For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father, who is over all and in all and living through all. Vs. 4

Please note first of all the Trinitarian nature of this verse. There's one body because there is only one Spirit who births and brings the Church about, and only one Lord Jesus who is its head.

There's one hope, one faith, one baptism, because there's only one Lord Jesus who is the way, the truth, and the life. Finally although he doesn't say it explicitly, there's only one family of God because there's only one Father of all, who is above all, through all, and in all. Our Christian unity is not some 'pipe dream', expected by God, prayed for by Jesus, and created by the Holy Spirit, no, Christian Unity, the Church (capital "C") is merely a reflection of the inherent unity maintained in the Divine Trinity.

Each part of the trinity has it's own function, not unlike different churches within the body. Each part of the trinity plays a specific role, and has specific responsibilities, not unlike the different expressions of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit; as seen in the different Christian denominations. This is why disunity is so damaging. The spirit and human acts of discord, disagreement, and destruction are not so much aimed and leveled at the local church, or individuals thereof; they are a direct affront to God, Jesus and The Spirit because they are the source, base, foundation and purest expression of the unity God desires of ALL His followers. Christian Unity is a direct reflection of God's Unity within the trinity.

3. CHRISTIAN UNITY IS ENRICHED BY THE DIVERSITY OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS

However, he has given each one of us a special gift through the generosity of Christ...Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Vs. 7, 11

Thirdly, our unity is enriched and built up by the diversity of gifts within the Church. If you look at the great diversity of people and gifts and personality types in any given church you might well despair of ever reaching unity. You see, although there's only one Church and one God, one Spirit, one Lord, etc; the church itself is made up of a whole lot of individuals, everyone of us different from all the rest. So how are we to come to unity from that sort of foundational reality?

Well, Paul says, it's not as bad as it looks at first glance. You see each of us is different, true, we're all individuals, yes, but we're different for a reason.. "Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift." That is, the differences you see are often the result of the different ways Christ wants us to work...together! Someone once likened the Church to a jigsaw puzzle. You know, one of those puzzles where no two pieces are the same. And not only are the pieces different, but they each have sections that stick out or in, that other pieces have to link into.

Don't think of yourself as inferior to someone else in this congregation because you only do this job, or that job, and they do a more important job. If the mayor of Bismarck (Ft Yates) goes AWOL for three weeks, life would still continue and others would pick up the pieces and carry on. There probably wouldn't be too much of a disturbance. But if the garbage collectors went AWOL for three weeks, the city would be in a real mess and it would cause all kinds of problems. Don't think you're any less important than someone else in the body of Christ. What you do does not define who you are. And also, don't think you're any more important than everyone else in the body of Christ. We are all members of ONE body, with different gifts to enhance our effectiveness and enrich our experiences!

4. CHRISTIAN UNITY DEMANDS OUR CONTINUAL GROWTH TO MATURITY

This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. Vs. 13

Now, notice immediately why these gifts are given. They are not given for an individual's personal enrichment. They are not given so we'll have more fun being a Christian, or so the Christian life might be easier for us to live. No, the gifts are given so that we might become mature!

The gifts are only the means to the end; maturity is the end! So many in the church are completely satisfied getting their names on the roll, their foot in the door, their marrying, burying, and baptism insurance, that's all they want! Our standard of maturity is to be measured by nothing less than the full stature of Jesus Christ. And the fact we'll likely never reach it this side of heaven, is no excuse for circumventing or ceasing the process. We are always to be growing, there is always more to learn, there is never an end to the 'becoming like Christ', process of discipleship.

One reason we have such a lack of unity in so many churches is because we have so many 'believers' who are not maturing. Their faith has stopped just past the altar; their faith is not alive, or growing. The reason so many people perpetuate disunity often lies at the feet of immaturity and insignificance. If churches were full of honestly seeking unbelievers, and less 'self-assured' Pharisees, I believe we'd see more unity. If churches were full of aggressively growing disciples, and less 'already arrived' saints, I believe we'd see more unity.

St. Augustine penned a rule that should guide our relationships with other believers: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

Another great theologian, Charles Schultz ...(peanuts author) wrote a cartoon depicting our dilemma. Lucy and Linus are watching TV, when Lucy demands that Linus change the channel, (this was back in the day before remote controls) threatening him with her fist if he didn't comply. "What makes you think you can walk into my house, take over, and tell me what to do?" asks Linus. "These five fingers," says Lucy. "Individually they're nothing special, but when I curl them together like this, into a single unit, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold". As he makes his way to the TV set, Linus looks at his fingers and says, "Why can't you guys get organized like that?"

Indeed, why can't we get unified like that, with greater strength, purpose and resolve? We must develop greater Christian Character, live more knowledgeable of the Godhead's unity, discover and utilize our unique gifts, until we become like Jesus Himself. Unity, it's possible!

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