

Eight Principles of Unity

M. W. Bassford, 3-13-11

As we all know, one of the greatest struggles that any church faces is the struggle to remain united. God's word could not be clearer that He wants His people to be one. Look, for example, at 1 Corinthians 1:10. God loves to see His people in agreement, and He doesn't want all of the petty quarrels that mar so many other spheres of human activity to tear apart His church. In fact, when the Restoration movement began in this country in the early 19th century, one of the goals that most motivated its leaders was the desire to leave behind human division and be united.

Sadly, this goal of Christian unity has proven difficult to attain. Over the past 200 years, the Lord's people in this country have endured two splits that affected the entire brotherhood: one split in the late 19th and early 20th centuries over instrumental music and missionary societies, and another split in the '50s and '60s over institutionalism and fellowship halls. Those controversies were marked not just by doctrinal disagreement, but by a quarrelsome and contentious attitude that brought little credit to either side. Satan might have been pleased, but God wasn't.

As individual Christians in an autonomous church, there's not much we can do to prevent brotherhood infighting, but we can work to prevent similar evil within our own congregation. Our unity recently faced a serious test from our recent period of study about the eldership. As I've said from the pulpit, I thought the way we handled that study, even in times when we disagreed with one another, brought great credit to us and to the Lord. During that study, I discussed the subject with people who had a wide range of opinions, but I never saw anyone act ungodly.

However, that doesn't mean that we can rest on our laurels and assume that we've got this division thing licked. Instead, we need to confirm our good behavior by returning to the word. Let's look, then, at eight principles of unity.

Basic Principles

Within the subject of unity, one of the most fundamental things we can do is to remember to **LOVE ONE ANOTHER**. This is why Paul describes it as he does in Colossians 3:14. Here's the picture that Paul is painting for us: All of the virtues that he describes earlier in Colossians 3 are like articles of clothing. Love is like the belt that holds everything up and everything together. In the case of the local church, love is the belt that holds us together.

In just about every case of division that I've ever seen or heard of, the division happened because of a failure to love. In fact, there's only one case I can think of in which division is inevitable, regardless of how much the parties involved love one another. That situation only occurs when one brother believes that God's word requires something from the church, but another brother believes that the word prohibits that very thing. For instance, let's say that a brother believes that he can speak in tongues, and further that God's will demands that he speak in tongues in the assembly. I, on the other hand, do not believe that the gift of tongues continues today, and that no one should ever speak in tongues in the assembly. What he thinks is necessary, I think is prohibited, and the only way for us to resolve that problem is for us to go our separate ways. In every other instance, though, we can resolve challenges to unity if we only love one another.

As important as this is, though, the command to love one another is only the second commandment. The first is to **LOVE GOD**. Sometimes, our love of God and our desire to remain united with Him will force us to separate ourselves from our brother. Paul cites one example of this in 2 Thessalonians 3:5-6. It's not coincidental that these two verses are right next to each other. The Thessalonians were about to face a stern challenge. There were brethren in their church who refused to work, and if they continued to refuse, the rest were going to have to withdraw from them. For the Thessalonians, that was going to be a wrenching event, and they could only get through it by loving God first of all.

The same should be true for us whenever we face the necessity of withdrawal. If we get all excited and self-righteous about tossing some unrepentant sinner out of the church, that only shows that we have failed to love them as we should. If our hearts are right, separating from the wicked will always be an unpleasant and indeed heartbreaking task. However, sometimes it's necessary for us to go through that heartbreaking process. Our highest loyalty cannot be to our brethren, regardless of our love for them. Peace at any price is not the first rule of Christianity. Instead, it's to love God.

As part of this, we must also recognize that unity is only possible with those who **HONOR GOD'S WORD**. Look, for instance, at Paul's words in Romans 15:4-5. In this congregation, what unites us is not our identical list of beliefs. I don't share the same perspective on every issue with my own wife, let alone with all of you. We aren't one because of our shared answers. We're one because of the way that we look for those answers, because we believe that God's word should govern our conduct both individually and as a church, and that we can learn how to behave through study of the word. We can't be united with those who only wish to follow their own opinions on an issue. We can't be united with those who seek authority in the traditions of some denomination. However, we can be united with those who love the Scripture. This is a journey, not a destination. None of us ever have the right to say, "I've got it all figured out, and you need to agree with me." Instead, it's a lifelong search we share together for the truth of God in His word.

Principles in Application.

Part of being dedicated to unity within the word is that we must **REJECT HUMAN WISDOM**. Paul warns about this in 1 Corinthians 3:18-19. In context, the problem Paul was addressing in the Corinthian church was that they were splitting into factions. Some of them wanted to identify themselves as followers of Paul, others as followers of Apollos, and so on. In this, though, they weren't obeying the law of Christ. They were following what they themselves thought best. As Paul notes, the wiser Christians become in their own eyes, they more foolish they become to God.

Today, we must also be wary of the allure of our own wisdom, and we certainly cannot bind it on our brethren. This includes not just our own ideas that we know aren't in the Bible, but also the things that we might think are in the Bible but actually aren't there. For instance, I've heard it argued that Christians should never buy a meal at a restaurant that also serves alcohol, lest someone see them in the restaurant and conclude that they're drinking. Now, regardless of what we think of that particular piece of logic, it is clearly something that we cannot find in Scripture. It is a rule of human wisdom. When we start insisting on rules like that, we make it impossible for others to be united with us.

Similarly, we must be careful **NOT TO BIND LIBERTIES**. In other words, we cannot demand the right to do something that offends the conscience of our brother and leads him to sin. Paul points this out in 1 Corinthians 8:12-13. The issue under discussion here is whether Christians could eat meat. Many first-century brethren believed that it was wrong to do so. Paul here isn't worried that those brethren would believe his eating of meat was sinful. That was their problem. His concern was that his example would lead them to eat meat and so sin against their own conscience. In that situation, he was willing to give up his own liberty to eat meat in order to keep his brother from sin.

Today, it is especially important that we not insist on our own liberties in a congregational context. Let me give you an example of this. My parents have always had a non-institutional perspective. They believe it's wrong to spend church funds to build fellowship halls or support orphans' homes. However, when they lived in New Jersey, they worshiped with an institutional church that had a kitchen in the church building. That was a problem for my parents. The other brethren, though, dealt with this problem in an admirable and loving manner. Even though they didn't agree with my parents, they decided to stop using the church kitchen for as long as my parents were there, so that my parents weren't required to sin against their consciences. They surrendered what they saw as their liberty for the sake of unity.

Likewise, it's important **NOT TO JUDGE**. Consider the words of Paul in Romans 14:4. These words are addressed to one who has a more restrictive view of Scripture than his brother. For instance, let's say that I believe it's wrong for a Christian to have a Christmas tree. You believe it's perfectly acceptable for you to have a Christmas tree, and so, every holiday season, you get your fake tree out of storage and engage in a practice I believe is wrong.

In that situation, I'm not to judge you, and my responsibility not to judge has several different applications. I can't demand that you throw out your Christmas tree in order to conform to my conscience. I can't go around telling everybody else in the congregation what a wicked sinner you are because you have a Christmas tree. Nor can I even form the opinion in my own heart that you are being a dishonest Bible student because you have arrived at a different conclusion than I have. Sometimes, this is a conclusion that's forced upon us. For example, any man who claims that the Bible gives him the right to cheat on his wife clearly is not being an honest Bible student. However, in the closer cases that cause most of the controversy in the church, we can't pass judgment on our brethren's actions or motives.

On the other hand, those with less restrictive views of Scripture must learn **NOT TO REGARD OTHERS WITH CONTEMPT**. Consider the question that Paul asks in Romans 14:10. God is the One who is in the judgment business, we ourselves are not, and that rule cuts both ways. Let's go back to the Christmas tree example. If you believe Christmas trees are OK, and I believe they aren't, there are several things that you aren't allowed to do either. You aren't allowed to try to shame me into putting up a Christmas tree. You aren't allowed to gossip with other Christians about what a ridiculous Pharisee I am. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, you aren't allowed to question my honesty as a Christian either. I may well be wrong, but it's your responsibility to grant me the courtesy of believing that I am sincerely wrong, that I do what I do because of my love for Christ. Otherwise, your contempt is hindering my unity with you.

Finally, in all of our disputes, we must look to **PLEASE ONE ANOTHER**. At the very end of the discussion about conscience in Romans 14, Paul raises this point in Romans 15:1-2. If we are disciples of Christ, we are committed to be imitators of Christ, and the very essence of Christ's life on earth was that He gave up everything that He had, even though He didn't want to, for our good. If we want to be united, we must place the same value on one another that Christ did and seek one another's good before our own. We don't get to put our stomping boots on and go stomping through the church, demanding that we must get our way, regardless of who gets crushed in the process. Instead, in all of the positions that we take and the decisions that we make, we must always act with consideration for our brethren. We have an obligation to speak the truth as we see it, but we must always speak that truth in love. If we can avoid a conflict and still remain true to our God, we have a responsibility to avoid that conflict. If the conflict is inevitable, we must choose our words humbly and carefully. Only as we are dedicated to pleasing one another can we still remain one.