

Unity

M. W. Bassford, 8-18-13

As most of you know, last week I returned from a week-long “vacation” at the Hymninar, which is a hymn-writing workshop in Columbia, MO. At the Hymninar, students are asked to write one technically proficient hymn verse on a topic of their choosing. The topics that students choose for their original thoughts often offer an interesting window into what’s on the mind of the brotherhood. One of the students this year elected to write on the topic of unity because of the problems he has seen caused by division and strife in the Lord’s body. Although the brother in question doesn’t know it, other students have written on the same topic for similar reasons for most of the Hymninar’s history.

Sadly, this points to an unfortunate truth. As is true of mankind generally, Christians sometimes have trouble getting along with each other, and it causes all kinds of discord in churches when they do. As our older members can testify, there have been several periods of strife in the history of the Joliet church, and such conflict has done more to hinder the work here than just about anything else. Unless we want history to repeat itself, we must pay better attention to the vast number of Scriptures that address the subject. Let’s look this morning, then, at unity.

The Importance of Unity

For once in my life, I’m not going to begin our study by defining terms. Instead, let’s start by considering the importance of unity. First and foremost, unity is **REQUIRED**. Consider with me 1 Corinthians 1:10. There are few things more dispiriting to me than division among brethren. However, I gain some measure of consolation from the realization that Christians in the first century had as much trouble as we do. The problem was widespread, but nowhere was it more serious than in the church in Corinth. The Corinthians splintered into factions based on their economic status, the apostle or teacher they preferred to follow, and even the kind of spiritual gift with which they had been endowed. They were as disunited as they could possibly be. If the church in Corinth were magically transported into the 21st century and installed 20 miles down the road from us, we probably wouldn’t want anything to do with them!

When this flood of contention is reported to Paul, he tells them that by the authority of Jesus Christ, they had to knock it off at once. The expectations of our Lord as presented here are stark: complete agreement, no divisions, unity of mind, and unity of judgment. Make no mistake, friends—this is an extraordinarily high bar! In my life, I’ve been a member at seven different churches, and not one of them had a complete measure of those four qualities.

Indeed, the congregational search for perfect unity is about the same as the individual search for perfect obedience. In both cases, the Biblical command represents an aspiration rather than something we will achieve by ourselves. In this, as in all things, we must rely on the grace of Christ to perfect us. However, it must still be something to which we do aspire. For a church to be at its best, every member must be fully committed to the work of unity.

Second, unity is **ENCOURAGING**. Paul expresses this hope for the Philippian church, another congregation that had its unity struggles, in Philippians 1:27-28. It’s never pleasant to be associated with any organization that is factious. Just look at the current political landscape. Our current Congress is perceived as unusually partisan and divisive, and as a consequence, Congress now has approval ratings about on a par with cockroaches and telemarketers. We don’t even like to see our politicians bickering. How much more, then, are we discouraged to see contentiousness among Christians, people who are actually supposed to be morally upright and good?

On the other hand, though, it is equally encouraging to associate with brethren who are united and kindly disposed toward one another. It’s always funny to me how being away from home for a week or two gives me a fresh perspective when I come back, and one of the things that struck me during our worship service last Sunday morning was how happy and harmonious our assembly felt. There is an unmistakable spirit to a united church, and such a church will inspire those who belong to it, gladden Christians from other places, and encourage outsiders to join it.

Third, unity is **EDIFYING**. Indeed, unity is a prerequisite for edification. Paul explains why in Ephesians 4:15-16. From this, friends, we must learn that unity is not merely a matter of attitude. It is a matter of action. We don’t want to be a harmonious congregation simply because harmony is pleasant, although it is. We want to be a harmonious congregation because harmony is effective. Only when we are united in the same mind can we be united in the same course of action, and only when we are united in the same course of action are we most effective at building up.

I believe this unity of attitude and action was clearly on display during the preparation for our recent vacation Bible school. There were literally dozens of the members here involved in that effort, it was a complicated effort, and as far as I know, the church here hadn’t tried a VBS for decades. In short, it could easily have been a breeding ground for disputes of every kind. However, that’s not the way that things went. Instead, we shared the same spirit and worked together toward a common goal, with spiritual benefits for our kids, for children from the community, and for every single Christian who worked on the project. If instead only a few of us had been in on the work, I don’t think it would have been nearly as effective or nearly as beneficial. There are lots of lessons we can learn from our VBS experience, but perhaps the most important is this: when we all work together as a church, good things happen. Let’s remember that.

Finally, unity is **GOD-GLORIFYING**. Paul raises this point in Philippians 2:14-15. We've already commented on the sadly disunited state of humankind generally. We know how easily unity can go wrong in gatherings of people from family size to country size. The flip side of that, though, is how impressive it is when unity goes right. When dozens of Christians are able to interact and work together without serious problems, that says that we aren't just doing what we want. It says that we have given our lives over to God, and that He is helping us work together for His glory. We shine for the benefit of everyone, both inside and outside the church, and we reveal that Christ dwells within us.

Friends, that is nothing less than what we were created to do. As human beings, we exist to glorify God, and on the Day of Judgment, He will evaluate our lives to determine whether or not we did glorify Him. The Scripture leaves us with no doubt that God is ashamed when His children bite and devour one another, and if that is our manner of life, we will suffer for it eternally. On the other hand, if our conduct reveals the influence of the God of peace, He will be pleased with us and reward us. Unity doesn't only make a difference in this life. It makes a difference in the life to come too.

Christ and Unity

In a few minutes we're going to partake of the Lord's Supper, but before we do so, we're going to consider the connection between Christ and unity, as laid out by Paul in the first half of Philippians 2. He begins by urging the squabbling Philippians to have **A HUMBLE ATTITUDE**. This appears in Philippians 2:1-2. Implicit in Paul's words here is the idea that unity is a group characteristic, but it has an individual origin. We can't glare and point fingers and say, "We'll be united when Brother So-and-So stops acting like a jerk." Instead, regardless of what anyone else does, it's our responsibility to do what we can to ensure unity. In this, we must be inspired by the kindest feelings that we have learned from Christ. Just as there are powerful forces that seek to pull us apart as brethren, there are equally powerful forces that bind us together, and we must allow our better natures to be guided by affection, sympathy, and love.

Unity isn't about coincidence. We aren't united because we happen to agree on everything. Instead, unity is the result of want-to, of loving our brothers and sisters so much that we can't bear the thought of being divided from them. That's where the one mind and the one accord and the one spirit come from. Most of all, though, they come from having hearts focused on others instead of on ourselves, our beliefs, our desires, and our grievances. Only when we erase ourselves from the picture can we be entirely focused on others and their welfare.

This humble attitude inevitably leads to **HUMBLE ACTION**. Paul defines what this means in Philippians 2:3-4. In this section, though, he also defines what it means to behave proudly and divisively. The first two problems he cites in this area are obvious. There is no room in the kingdom of Christ for rivalry with other Christians, whether we want to be known as the best song leader or the most popular hostess. Likewise, there is no place for conceit, for insisting that we know best and should be treated best. Those attitudes can only produce disaster in a local church.

Less obvious, though, is the third problem, the problem of only looking after our own interests. This isn't a problem with what we are doing. It's a problem with what we aren't doing. When we look after our own interests, we devote ourselves only to the things that naturally matter to us. We are concerned with ourselves, our families, and maybe a few close friends. Our focus is no broader than it would be if we weren't Christians at all. After all, people in the world care about themselves, their families, and their friends too. In consequence, we treat other Christians who aren't family or close friends just like people in the world would treat them. We ignore them. We don't care whether they want to help or are lonely or need encouragement. They aren't part of our interests, and that too is a form of selfishness.

Instead, we have to consider that everyone else in the church is more important than we are, and that their interests are fully as significant as ours are. We can claim that such is our attitude all we want, but our actions prove whether it is actually true of us. Do we spend time encouraging others and helping them with the projects that they care about? Do we look to the interests not only of our loved ones, but of the people on the fringes, the brethren who are easily overlooked? They must be able to count on us to remember them and help them when they need it.

In this, we must above all follow **CHRIST'S EXAMPLE**. Paul gives us a thumbnail sketch of the life of Christ in Philippians 2:5-8. We think we're so important; Jesus actually was important, but He made Himself like we are so that He could help us. We're focused on our homes and families, but Jesus left His Father and His home in heaven to come to the aid of people who sinned against Him constantly. We make excuses about how hard it is to leave our comfort zone to obey God's command to care for others, but Jesus cared for us by obeying to the point of death on a cross.

In short, He had a mind that was focused totally on others and not at all on Himself. There was literally nothing He would not do for His Father and His brethren. That's impressive enough, but we must recognize also that Paul isn't merely telling a story about what Jesus was like. He's telling us that God expects us to have the mind of Christ in ourselves. We have to live that way too, concerned only about God and about others, if we want to be His disciples.

The story of Jesus, of course, doesn't end on the cross. Paul details **CHRIST'S EXALTATION** too. Read with me from Philippians 2:9-11. This is Paul's answer to a question that all of us are asking. Whenever God's word starts talking about living for others and not ourselves, I think there's a part of all of us that says, "Yeah, that's all fine and good, but if I spend my life in taking care of others, who's going to take care of me? Who's going to make sure that I get

what I'm entitled to?" Paul answers the question by pointing to Jesus. When Jesus gave everything He had for us, in return, God gave Him everything. Likewise, if our first priority is taking care of others, God will take care of us. If we are humble people, constantly putting others and the unity of the spirit first, God will put us in a place of eternal exaltation.

On the other hand, if we aren't willing to trust God, if we aren't willing to live for others like Jesus did, if we give into the temptation to look after our own interests only, we can't expect that blessing from our heavenly Father. If we're in the business of self-exaltation, self-exaltation is all we are ever going to get, because God will abandon us.

This leads us to **PAUL'S CONCLUSION**. It appears in Philippians 2:12-13. "Work out your own salvation" is a familiar text, but we often forget that it occurs in the context of unity and humility. It follows, then, that we work out our own salvation by being unified and humble. God carries out His pleasure in us and does His work through us when we give ourselves in the service of others to benefit the whole body, like Christ Himself did.

Before the Lord's Supper, then, let's reflect first of all on Jesus, on the depth of His love for us, on His astonishing willingness to leave heaven to become a human being like us, to suffer and die a horrible death so that we could be forgiven of our sins. Then, let's remember that the life of Jesus is supposed to be the yardstick for our lives. When He has given so much for us, how can we hold anything back from the people around us? Let's ask ourselves how we're doing in that and remember our debt to Him as we partake.

Unity in Practice

During the final portion of our study, we're going to consider some practical things we can do to make sure that our church is a united church. The first of these is to **WALK WORTHY**. Paul exhorts us to behave in this way in Ephesians 4:1-2. As far as I can tell, the point is that we need to remember that we are disciples of Jesus and then act like it. As we saw before the Lord's Supper, Jesus always had His mind on others, and He always acted in a way that would benefit them. When we obey the gospel, we make a promise that we're going to do our best to live like Jesus lived. That's a simple concept and an easy promise to make, but it's awfully hard to do. Few of us indeed have an easy time going through life living for others. Instead, we constantly struggle with selfishness elbowing its way back into the middle of our thinking. We get to believing that the world revolves around us, that what matters most in the church is that we get what we want, and we expect others to serve us instead of looking ourselves for ways to serve others. That self-centered, self-entitled version of Christianity is the very opposite of what Christ died to create. It is an unworthy walk. Our priorities and our benefit should matter as much to us as they did to Christ, which is to say not at all.

As this text remarks, one of the most important places our Christlike attitude should manifest itself is in bearing with others. Whenever a brother does something that annoys us, there are one of two possibilities. Either he is in sin, in which case we need to go to him as per Matthew 18, or he is not, in which case our responsibility is to bear with. I don't have the right to gossip about my brother's godly choices, whether they are matters of conscience or matters of taste. I don't have the right to get mad about his personality quirks. I don't have the right to mentally divide the church up into people who agree with my opinion and people who don't. All of those things are deadly threats to unity. Brethren, when we consider all that Christ puts up with in us, the least we can do is bear with one another!

Paul continues on to say that we must **BE DILIGENT** to preserve the unity that exists. Look at Ephesians 4:3. It's cliché to say that marriage takes work, that for a marriage to be successful, both husband and wife have to constantly make the effort to stay together. It's cliché to say that, but it's true. Now, friends, if keeping two people together requires that level of diligence, what does it take to keep 100 people together? Unity in our congregation can't be a matter of coincidence or happenstance. It has to be the result of a conscious decision on the part of every member here to be and remain united, to love and appreciate our brethren even when and especially when we disagree with them, to work through the little squabbles and fusses that inevitably arise, and ultimately to recognize that the unity of the spirit is more important than us getting our own way. If we want a peaceful congregation, we must behave that way not once, but habitually. Above all, we have to quit making exceptions for ourselves. We have to quit saying, "Yeah, I know I'm supposed to bear with Brother So-and-So, but he was SO UNBELIEVABLY WRONG in Bible class, and he sent my blood pressure through the roof, so I have no choice, really, but to complain about him to my family and my friends, and they all agree with me that he's a jerk, and. . ." Brethren, there's a concise Biblical description for that behavior. It's called "sin". We need to look to build up our brother and the church, not tear him and it down.

Indeed, we must actively seek to **HONOR ONE ANOTHER**. This is the point of Romans 12:10. We are supposed to care about our brother being honored, not accumulating honor for ourselves. In practice, here's what this looks like. First, we have to pay attention to who's doing what for the Lord. Notice when a brother leads singing or leads a prayer for the first time. Notice when a sister volunteers to teach one of the downstairs classes for the first time. Pay attention to the godly things that Christians do as individuals. In short, be aware of the good that's going on. Second, praise the people who are doing good things. Praise them to their faces. Praise them to other Christians. Praise them on Facebook. Anywhere you can shoehorn in a kind word, do so. Third, help them and support them in their work. Make it clear that you're there for them so that they can continue in serving the Lord. That kind of attitude makes a difference.

Of course, the opposite is to be focused on ourselves, in making sure that we get the recognition we're entitled to for all our hard work. Talk about a pointless activity! I don't know about the rest of y'all, but when I sense that a Christian is bragging on himself, my opinion of him actually declines. Who cares? God sure doesn't. If others choose to praise our good works, well and good. If not, God won't forget, and His regard is the only thing that matters.

Finally, we must **REMEMBER THE HUMBLE**. Paul points out the importance of every Christian in 1 Corinthians 12:21-22. It seems like in every congregation I've ever been associated with, and this one is no exception, there is a group of Christians at the core of the church, and then a number who drift around the periphery. Core Christians tend to be more frequent in their attendance, more prominent in the public worship, more active in the work of the church, and more socially intertwined with the other members. Peripheral Christians tend to be none of those things.

It should be the goal of core Christians to bring those on the periphery in as much as possible. Too much of the time, more prominent brethren are apt to make excuses about this. They'll say things like, "Well, I hosted a Bible study at my house, I put the date and time in the bulletin, but they didn't come, so I guess they don't care." Well, not necessarily. Have we made it a point to talk to them every time we see them at services, so they know they're important to us? Have we shown hospitality by inviting them in particular to dine with us and our families? Did we mention the Bible study to them specifically and make clear that we would be delighted to see them there? If we haven't done those things, brethren on the fringe may well assume that the Bible study was intended for core Christians and not for them, and—let's be honest—they may well be right about that. We may claim that an open invitation means that we welcome everybody, but our pattern of behavior makes clear whom we really welcome.

Admittedly, this doesn't always work. Sometimes, people on the fringe are there because they want to stay on the fringe, and people like that will often end up drifting right out of the church. However, we don't have the right to make that assumption about anybody. It must be our goal to bring them in and involve them in the work of the church.