

The Struggle to Find and Live in Unity

1 Corinthians 1:4-11

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Unity: the state or quality of being in accord and in harmony; having a singleness of purpose or action; of being joined as a whole.

The quest to find and live in unity is, and always has been, quite a struggle. Yet, all the world's religions have written eloquently about its virtues.

From a Hindu sacred text:

May the divine create between us and strangers
A unity of hearts.
May we unite in our minds,
Unite in our purposes and
Not fight against the divine spirit
Within us.
(-Atharva Veda)

From a Buddhist sacred text:

Happy is the unity of the [assembly] (Sangha).
Happy is the discipline of ones so united.
(-Dhammapada)

From a Baha'i text:

O contending people and kindreds of the earth!
Set your faces toward unity,
And let the radiance of its light shine upon you.
(Baha'u'llah)

From a Jewish sacred text:

How good and pleasant it is
When kindred dwell together in unity!
(Psalm 133:1)

From a Christian sacred text:

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.
(1 Corinthians 1:10)

Whether we're talking about the ancient Israelites, the first Christians, or modern day religious institutions (let alone politics for that matter), it seems that **we have always been, and continue to be, a long way from achieving a true sense of unity.** For does it

not appear that discord, divisions and overall disunity rule the day, even after a Presidential call to civility just over a week ago?

The world is dividing itself up and taking sides. Lines have been drawn in the sand. Divisive debates and incendiary rhetoric is running rampant. Accusations abound. Name calling and labeling are the order of the day. That, by the way, applies to the church as well as to society.

From a Christian perspective, then, the Apostle Paul's call to Christian unity is just as timely and relevant today as it was to that divided and quarreling Corinthian congregation 2000 years ago. **That ancient struggle of how to find unity in the midst of diversity has indeed become one of our most pressing modern struggles – whether it be in religious, political, or cultural circles.**

Do you ever wonder if anybody even really wants unity? One author on this topic writes, “The often excruciating discipline, the extraordinary necessity to relinquish prejudice and alienation, the requisite will to abandon habit and embrace obedience to the call to oneness – these are daunting to us.”

By unity, I don't mean uniformity, where everyone is expected to believe the same things and act in the same ways. The kind of Christian unity that Paul envisions is not about doctrinal orthodoxy, still less a uniformity of speech and behavior. He knows firsthand that those Christians in the Greek port city of Corinth were remarkably diverse.

Christian faith is not first of all a matter of right belief, regardless of what some people say, and keep trying to push down everyone else's throat. **Instead, Christian faith is a way of life – a way of relating to God and each others; a way of love and compassion and justice and service and peace.**

So let me say it again, we should not confuse unity with uniformity. To agree and be of the same mind and judgment and purpose does *not* require us to formulate our theology in identical terms. Years ago, the World Council of Churches developed the slogan, “Doctrines divide, but service unites.” Recently, Tulsa Metropolitan Ministries (TMM) adopted a very similar slogan, “**Doctrine divides, but love unites.**” Although doctrines have their appropriate place and purpose in the life of the church, it seems next-to-impossible to reach a consensus on certain (perhaps most) doctrines. That's why the Presbyterian denomination has consistently refused to provide a specific list of “essential tenets” that we all must agree upon. Later in 1 Corinthians, in fact, in spite of all the spiritual cliques, Paul will affirm the diversity of their gifts and ministries. He makes it clear that diversity itself comes from God.

Unity, then, is more about mutual forbearance (to use a historical Presbyterian phrase) **and the desire to build respectful, trusting relationships among persons with varied perspectives and views.**

Is it also not true, for example, that no one Christian, no single denomination or congregation within a denomination (including ours) has the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? Following this line of thought, **perhaps unity begins by recognizing that every Christian, every single denomination, every congregation (including ours) has their strengths AND the weaknesses; their truth AND their prejudices; their clear sense of vision AND their blind spots.** That's why we need each other.

Perhaps unity also needs to begin by recognizing those with whom we disagree as “equals” without having to “convert” one another to “our way.” The Apostle Paul goes out of his way to make the point that in Christ **we are equals in the sight of God, yet different – different in belief and practice, yet all part of the Body of Christ.** Perhaps

unity begins by recognizing that our differences are indeed treasures and gifts to offer each other and the world.

We must also recognize that **Christian unity cannot be commanded**. Instead, Paul's call for "no divisions among you" (v. 10) shows the purpose of God's work in Christ, reconciling the world and bringing peace. Though I wouldn't say it in quite this way, I basically agree when one biblical commentator states:

One of the fundamental insights worth noting is that our unity in Christ is something that exists by virtue of our incorporation into Christ through baptism. It is *already* present, waiting to be realized rather than something that has to be created by human effort. It is something *implicit* within the Christian fellowship. Whether it becomes *explicit* in the congregational life depends on the way we relate to each other." (Italics mine.)

So once again, **finding and living in unity basically boils down to the ways we choose to relate to one another, inside and outside the church**. Perhaps that is one of the greatest purposes of the church, to build community. That is certainly a prime mission and goal within this congregation.

From Paul's perspective, we must never overemphasize individual freedom at the expense of the common good. **We must never divide ourselves so completely into special-interest groups that we harm our sense of unity as a community**. So, then, the words of the Apostle Paul are indeed my words to us (including myself) today:

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters of College Hill Presbyterian Church, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that there be no divisions among us, but that we be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

I invite you to be thinking this week of how any of this may apply to your personal and family life, your work or school life, and especially to the life and ministry of this congregation.

I think about it, I truly do, every time I go to a meeting of Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery. There are other pastors with whom I vehemently disagree on any number of issues. And yet, I often try to go out of my way (even though sometimes I have to force myself) to reach out in a spirit of Christian unity to those folks. For I truly believe it makes a difference. It helps by exhibiting that old line from scripture, that "they will know we are Christians by our love."

So let us persevere in the struggle to find and live in unity – unity in the midst of our diversity. Perhaps in that unity we will find not only the joining of adversaries, but rather a new creation – a people who are stronger than when standing alone – a people, as we heard in Ezekiel's imagery of two sticks being intertwined, "that they may be one in God's hand."

From God's perspective, no matter how polarized we are, we already are one, for we are all children of God. How and when will we realize that? How and when will we start living into that reality?

Amen.