

# Unity and Division in the Church Part 1 - Unity

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## Introduction

In the mid-1980's, three men were appointed as leaders of a tiny Christian fellowship in a middle-eastern country. They could not have been more different from each other. Hanwoo was a Pentecostal from Korea. He strongly believed in the submission to and movement of and through the Spirit of God; so much so that he refused to prepare for Sunday sermons so as not to quench the Spirit. Julian was from England and had a charismatic background. As such, he held to the use of tongues, the importance of experiencing God and the exercise of *all* the spiritual gifts. He did not however hold to some of Hanwoo's more extreme positions like instant healing or direction of the Spirit in all things. Then there was Steve, a fundamentalist from New England in the United States of America. While he had a vibrant walk with Christ, he could be designated as one of the "frozen chosen." He tended towards cessationism and did not like emotional engagement in his worship. For him, Scripture was first and experience came as a distant second or third. He tended towards a more reformed and cerebral view of the Christian life. In addition to this, Hanwoo spoke no English, so all of the church business had to be transacted in the local language, making things even more difficult for both Julian and Steve for whom English was the primary language. And yet, and yet these three very different men labored together for the foundation of one of the most effective fellowships in that country. Beyond that, they became friends who love and respect each other deeply. They evidenced a biblical unity that I have not encountered anywhere else so far. What was their secret? Let's consider that together.

## Our Unity Reflects the Glory of God (Jn 17:20-23)

Knowing these three men personally, there is one thing I am certain of: they love God deeply. They love Him more deeply than they love themselves, each other or even their ministry. I believe that they understood what Christ prayed for the church in John 17 and they did what they could to put it into action.

John records the longest prayer Jesus prayed in John 17. Right before His arrest and crucifixion, Jesus spoke with His father about three things: His mission, His followers and His followers' disciples – namely us. Here is what he prayed for us, who came millennia after His death and resurrection.

I pray not only for these, but also for those who believe in Me through their message. May they all be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I am in You. May they also be one in Us, so the world may believe You sent Me. I have given them the glory You have given Me. May they be one as We are one. I am in them and You are in Me. May they be made completely one, so the world may know You have sent Me and have loved them as You have loved Me. (Jn. 17:20-23)

In this passage, Jesus prays for our unity with the Triune God *so that* the world will believe that Jesus is the only way! Wow! According to *our Lord Jesus*, our unity is crucial to the spread of the Gospel. Beyond that, note that this unity flows from the glory Jesus has given us. If we do not persist in unity, we will not reflect God's glory. God's glory, after all, is the reason He created the world and puts up with us poor, miserable sinners who constantly heap shame Him and ourselves through our actions and submit ourselves to the powers of this world, living in fear and suffering (see Isa. 42:8; Eph. 1:11-14). Stop and think about that: the division among Christians is one of Satan's *most potent* weapons to keep people from believing. How often have you heard something to the effect of, "I like Jesus, I just don't like Christians"? I have often not wanted to come to church because of *that person* that I might run into. One of the Elders of the church I attend once put it this way, "How many of you invite someone over, but then say, 'But don't bring your spouse; I don't like them'? That is how we act towards the Church. We love Jesus, but don't like his wife."

There are a lot of Christians I don't really like. We don't have similar interests or they act or speak in ways I don't prefer. Maybe they sing off-key or they hold to a theological position that rubs me the wrong way. This, however, is the point: *I am called to love them and work towards unity with them anyway*; otherwise Christ does not receive the glory He deserves, the gospel witness of the church remains ineffective and Satan wins the battle. Brothers and sisters, when we fall for this ruse, we steal glory from God. Thus, *disunity in the local body is a form of sin*, because we set up

the idols of our comfort, our views, our likes and dislikes rather than what really counts: bringing the Triune God that which He is worthy of.

From my own experience, I know that biblical unity is not easy to obtain, but the Bible gives us two key points to keep in mind as to *how* to make it work. First, we must realize that for unity to work, we must build relationships. Second, we must realize that unity is very, very costly and will demand sacrifices of us.

## Our Unity Comes from Relationship (Eph. 4:4-14)

While Paul spends a lot of time on the concept of “fellowship” or “koinonia”, the key passage on unity in the body is found in Ephesians 4:1-15.

Therefore I, the prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, accepting one another in love, diligently keeping the unity of the Spirit with the peace that binds us. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope at your calling—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. Now grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of the Messiah’s gift. For it says: When He ascended on high, He took prisoners into captivity; He gave gifts to people. But what does “He ascended” mean except that He descended to the lower parts of the earth? The One who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things. And He personally gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the training of the saints in the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son, growing into a mature man with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness. Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit. But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into Him who is the head—Christ.

Paul builds his argument from the methodology to the end goal. We, however, will work backwards through the passage from the goal to the methodology in the hope of bringing more clarity to why God wants us to act in a certain way towards each other.

But before we begin, let’s consider term “fellowship” a bit. It is a difficult term to wrap our minds around, as we as Christians have a very different definition of it than the world does. The dictionary was not very helpful here, defining it with terms like “companionship, company; a community of interest, activity, feeling or interest; an association; a quality or state of being comradely.”<sup>1</sup> The Old Webster was a little more helpful by adding the terms “partnership; joint interest; company, a state of being together.”<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, Paul’s use of “fellowship” refers strictly to the relation of faith to Christ. It expresses our being one with Christ, as He prayed for in John 17, which “is not the elimination or fusion of personality but a new relationship based on the forgiveness of sins.” So, what fellowship comes down to is relationship: with Christ, with one another.

Paul defines the goal of this relationship in verses 13 and 14: it is unity in faith and the knowledge of Jesus Christ, resulting in the whole body of Christ, individually and collectively, being able to stand firm in her faith, no matter what theological, sociological or political ideas assail us; no matter how we feel at that moment; no matter what situations we end up in. This is what it is about: together we are stronger! Together we help one another to stand. Not one of us is meant to walk this road alone.

The Devil has done a good job of over-emphasizing either individualism or community. The reality, however, is that both are equally required for the Christian life to work. Each of us has an individual relationship with Christ. Unless a person comes to believe in Jesus individually he or she will not be saved; *but* that individual relationship is part of the larger organism of the body of Christ. In a recent article in the theological journal, *e-manet*, Chuck Faroe pointed

<sup>1</sup> “Fellowship”, *Merriam-Webster.com* < <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fellowship> > (Accessed September 21, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Noah Webster, “Fellowship”, *Webster’s Dictionary of American English* (1828).

out that while the Bible does call us to individual decisions and actions, it tends to address us as a community of Saints rather than as individuals.<sup>3</sup> So it must be clear that everything I do, everything you do affects the larger body. My tiny sin of overindulgence affects you, even if you don't know it. Your tiny sin of impatience affects me. Please understand this: any time a Christian views pornography, says a curse word, cheats on their taxes or gets drunk affects the whole body and takes away from this stability of unity, even if the body is not aware of it. This person makes it difficult for the body of Christ to attain that maturity, resulting in the body not receiving blessing and not being a blessing! Let's stop and think for a moment: is there something in *your* life which you are holding on to? Is there something you need to confess? Is there something that is preventing God's glory from shining in your life and in this community?

The aim is for the body to be joined together in unity, but *how* does one reach that point? As we move back up the passage, we see Paul giving us the means: the gifts Christ has given "for the training of the saints in the work of the ministry, to build up the body of Christ." I have studied the spiritual gifts a lot and while many of the studies I've read and looked at emphasize finding your gift and putting them in place, few that I have seen actually talk about the complementarity of the gifts. So, I would like to digress from our passage briefly to give an example of how various kinds of worshippers complement each other.

Over the years, I have observed that there are basically three kinds of worshippers: theologians, mystics and laborers. The **theologians**, are the cerebral ones. They are into doctrine and right teaching, making sure that everything lines up with Scripture. For them truth is paramount. Scratch a theologian and he or she will bleed Scripture. Theologians, however, are frequently impractical in their approach to life. Jesus is abstract to them. They talk a good game, but don't really walk the walk. They frequently end up being an embarrassment to the church because they are perceived as hypocrites. They are also usually harsh in their approach to sin, because they have a black-and-white view of teaching, alienating those who want to come to Christ through their insistence on right doctrine.

Secondly, we find the **mystics**. These are those for whom the relationship with Jesus is everything. Life is about "more Jesus". They are poets and musicians, those who love to spend time in personal and public worship. Talk to a mystic and you'll come away rejoicing about the greatness of God and what He does. They love God and everything about him. Mystics are frequently very emotional, which can be good, as they feel Jesus and experience Jesus; but it can also be bad, because they are up one day and down another. They value emotions above Scripture and so can slip into heresies or be chasing after the next great experience, rarely finding the settledness of a faithful walk. When it comes to sin, mystics will usually be very good at introspection and lamenting their own weaknesses, but too accepting of the persistent sin issues of people, choosing gentle love over what they think of as harsh truth.

Then we have the **laborers**. These are the ones for whom it is important to *be* Jesus. Their slogan is, "Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary use words." They are the ones getting the shoe boxes and traveling out to the disaster zones. They stand in line at the soup kitchens, put their arms around the suffering and make sure that the chores at church get done. Things don't run without them. They are all about love; *practical* love. However, they are often frazzled and tired because they're doing so much. They will often uncritically accept or gloss over sin, because for them it is far more important to bring the sinner into the Kingdom than to focus on a holy life. This because they don't like to deal with theology. They are also often too busy to come to a worship night and they won't be able to tell you *why* they are doing things and often will forget to share the Gospel as they serve.

Each of these three don't really like each other and so they form their own congregations. Theologians don't like mystics, because the mystics are emotional; they also don't like laborers, because they don't have time to listen to the deep theology and accept sinners without demanding life-change. Mystics think theologians are shallow, because they don't *know*, that is don't *experience*, Jesus. Laborers on the other hand are viewed as distractions from the all-important communion with Christ. And laborers view the theologians as harsh and judgmental hypocrites because they struggle to practice what they preach; mystics on the other hand are time-wasters because they aren't out helping those Christ has sent us to serve. So congregations of theologians are the frozen chosen: doctrinally sound, but boring, dusty and without practice. Churches of mystics have great worship times, but very little teaching substance. And groups of laborers have a lot of programs going, but sad Sunday services full of disconnected people.

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<sup>3</sup> Chuck Faroe: "Li-derkenar: Bireyellik Eğilimlerimiz," *e-manet*, No. 48 (October-December 2017), < <https://www.e-manetdergi.org/tr/dergi/makale/li-derkenar-bireysellik-egilimlerimiz> > (accessed 2017-11-09).

But, consider what it would be like if a congregation was formed of each of these three kinds of people and each was encouraged to work with the others. The theologians would keep the mystics and laborers on track in their doctrine by providing solid teaching; the mystics would make sure that everyone in the congregation would know and experience Christ; the laborers would encourage everyone to live their faith out in practical ways. The church would be living out the wonderful balance of truth and love and it would *grow*, because the love between these disparate groups would be evident to all! Each group is needed for the edification of all.

Returning to our text in Ephesians 4, Paul lists five gifts<sup>4</sup> (or assignments), each of which is required for the local church to run smoothly. We will look at each individually and then briefly consider how they may work together more effectively.

First, we have apostles. Regardless of what your position on the more miraculous gifts may be, **an apostle should be defined as a representative of Christ to the people.**<sup>5</sup> An apostle is outward-facing, representing the congregation to other congregations and the world. Often people who go into cross-cultural ministry are defined as apostles; and there are many anecdotes of how such apostles have been used by God in miraculous ways. Apostles are driven people, who feel that God has called them to a mission that only they can fulfill.

Then Paul lists **prophets**, whom we can define as **those whom God has gifted to speak into the lives of others.** Prophets see right and wrong more clearly than others and often are burdened for people to live the truth correctly. Prophets often weep, but sometimes are quite harsh in their speaking into the lives of others, even if their hearts are in the right place. Most people do not like prophets.

**Evangelists are those who proclaim the good news to others.** They are the ones who drive reproduction in the body. Often these brothers or sisters are really self-sufficient, seeing themselves as embodying all the gifts necessary for the building of the church. Evangelists are personable and usually very popular. Everyone initially loves an evangelist, but their self-sufficiency and driven nature can become a liability for them and the church.

**Pastors are those who care for and lead the people.** They tend to be merciful, attentive to the spiritual and emotional needs of others. They, like prophets, want to see people live life with Christ. They are accepting, often to the point that a pastor can be tempted to excuse sin in order to win someone over. After talking with a pastor, you will usually come away comforted. Pastors also frequently have administrative skills, making it possible for the church to function well.

And **teachers are the theologians of the church.** A teacher has a passion for truth, sometimes running over individuals when it comes to wrong doctrine. Teachers often have trouble dealing with people. They are intelligent and sometimes esoteric, but on the whole, they desire to see the church increase in their understanding of Scripture.

As we look at this list, we see that each of these gifts are required for the church to work. If there is no apostle, Christ will not have a courageous representative in that fellowship. A church without an evangelist won't grow. If a church doesn't have a prophet, sin will not be addressed. A church without a pastor will be a cold, unaccepting place without direction. A church without a teacher will fall into heresy. They are all necessary for the body to work correctly. Only in using the diverse gifts of the individuals in building up the church can the church be unified. The Christian church is the only place where unity and diversity can truly coexist. Each of these gifts is truly effective when used *together*. Each of the weaknesses complements the strengths of the other. No one can do it alone; we are not God, we are still human and we all need each other.

True unity understands that the gifts given by the Messiah are meant to reflect the one body and one spirit. We have one hope: Jesus Christ! He is our one Lord. We have one faith, in the Triune God and the risen Son. There is one baptism, which is in the Spirit at the point of salvation (see 1Co. 12:13). There is only one God and father of all who is above all and through all and in all. It doesn't matter what denomination you come from. It does not matter what odd theology you espouse. What matters is if you believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead and that He is your Lord. That is what it takes to be saved and then you are part of the one. God speaks to each of us in a unique way;

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<sup>4</sup> Some commentators will argue that there are only four gifts, the fourth being pastor-teachers, i.e. those who both shepherd the flock and teach them the Word of God. This is where the office of pastor found in many western Protestant denominations likely arose from.

<sup>5</sup> "Apostle", *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, James Orr, ed. (e-Sword digital version, 1938).

that unique vision is necessary for all of us to understand God together! *But* that won't happen naturally. It takes very hard work and a lot of sacrifice.

That being said, leadership in a congregation must be much clearer on how they will handle theological disparities amongst each other and in the direction of the church. The church may have a broad doctrinal statement, but if certain doctrines, like whether or not women will be allowed in Eldership, are not clarified by the leadership of the church, it will negatively affect unity.

For example, Hanwoo, Steve and Julian agreed that they would preach the cross and the cross only. When one presented a pet doctrine, another would present the other position. That even resulted in one of them having to present a sermon on a doctrinal point that he did not agree with! When they were faced with how doctrine affected structural issues, they presented each position to the congregation, discussed it together and took a decision based on what the Bible clearly taught. They did this and the church was blessed and it grew.

## Our Unity Demands Sacrifice (Eph 4:1-3,15; Rom. 14)

Take a look at the list at the top of the Ephesians passage. What is necessary for this unity to work? Humility, gentleness, patience, love-filled acceptance. These are very, very, very difficult. That is why Paul says in verse 3 that we are to "diligently keep the unity of the Spirit with the peace that binds us." Cancer in the body of Christ happens frequently, tearing us apart. The Devil will do everything He can to make unity fail, be that emphasizing our diversity in order to divide us or emphasizing our loving unity, trying to homogenize us. The devil is a pragmatist: whatever it takes to keep you from Christ, from growing, from being effective is what he'll encourage you to do.

You see, the Devil understands more than we do that what makes unity work is relationship. Especially we westerners don't understand the depths of relationship. Our culture focuses us on sexuality so much that we lose the concept of *phileo* – that non-sexual brotherly and sisterly depth of love which should exist in the church, and which leads to deep, lasting relationship. Unity only works among people who have face-time with each other. If you don't have a relationship with people in your fellowship, then unity is a sham. Unity hurts. Unity takes time and hard work. It takes prayer and talking and spending time and living life together.

**Unity demands humility** (Eph. 4:2a), which is a proper estimation of who I am, with all my strengths and weaknesses. Because when I know my weaknesses, then I can avail myself of your strengths to help overcome them and vice versa. It means that I will attempt to function in my gifting and encourage you to function in yours. It means that, no matter how talented I think I am, I will not usurp another person's ministry or role.

**Unity demands gentleness** (Eph. 4:2b), approaching the person across from me without running them over, appreciating and accepting who they are. It is being velvet steel: firm in my convictions, but never rigid so that when people strike me, they will be harmed. Often the people who are the roughest are so because they have never felt gentleness in their lives. Gentleness must be learned. It takes exercise. When my daughter was very small, she tried to pet our cat, Linus. He hated it, because what should have been a gentle caress became a hard smack from a pudgy little hand, as my daughter did not have the coordination to be gentle. So we must *practice* being gentle over and over again. This is a thing I need to work on.

**Unity demands patience** (Eph. 4:2c), not giving up on each other. It means going the extra mile to smooth things over. It means I choose to accept you, no matter who or what you are. It also means that I will not allow you to stay where you are, but we will journey together, you by making sure that I am dragged out to work the field or spending time in the presence of God, experiencing Him, I by making sure that you know why you're doing what you're doing and staying within the bounds that God has set in His word.

**Unity is speaking the truth in love** (Eph. 4:2d,15). And the only way to do this is to be in relationship with Truth and Love, for Jesus Himself is Truth and Jesus Himself is Love.<sup>6</sup> As we get to know Jesus better, both in teaching and in experience, we will find ourselves more able to express this. Speaking truth in love means that we are quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to wrath (Jas. 1:19). Sometimes it means not saying anything at all; and wisdom is knowing when to speak and when to be silent.

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<sup>6</sup> See J.M. Diener, "Pondering the Master: The Relationship of Truth and Love", *WolfHawke.com*, September 2017 < <https://www.wolfhawke.com/ptm/relationship-truth-and-love> > (accessed on 2017-11-10).

For me personally, there are several doctrines I hold to that I do not trumpet about in the church I attend, because it might hurt the unity of the fellowship and make it less effective. These doctrines may make the church work better, but they also may be extraneous. I may talk about them in private and enjoy a good discussion with someone that doesn't agree with me as we sharpen each other, but I will not do so in a way or venue where someone who disagrees with me will be torn down. And I will not talk behind that person's back, saying how stupid they are for believing this extraneous doctrine.

Speaking truth in love means I understand the principle of the weaker brother as Paul explains it in Romans 14. But here's the kicker of this passage: *each of us is a weaker brother or sister in one way or another*. I may not have an issue with having a beer now and again, but I know several brothers who do have an issue with that. I will not act in such a way to tempt them to sin. Another brother may not have an issue with reading the news, but I am weak in that area in that it tempts me to be angry with and hate people I disagree with. Where is your weakness? More importantly, where is the weakness of your brother or sister? Sit down and talk with them. Learn about it. Think about how you can pray for them and make sure that you are not acting in a way that will cause them to sin. Imagine the church which made it a point to not offend the weaker siblings. *That* is showing love! And it is very, very, very costly, because I will have to give up my freedom to protect my brother.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer pointed out that the Other – my brother or sister – makes an ethical claim on me and stands as a barrier or boundary to my self. That means that when I encounter the other, I am called to respond and become accountable.<sup>7</sup> When we are in a relationship we will have to give something up to make it work. I have to give up me-time to show my love to my family. There are many things I'd like to do, like sit down and write computer programs, that I don't do so I can give my wife and kids the attention they need. The same is true of the church. How serious we are about the unity of the church will become clear in how much we are willing to give up to make it work.

## Summation

So, how then shall we live? To foster unity we need to do three things.

First, we need to decide unity is as important to us as it is to God and to commit to fostering it.

Second, we need to begin building relationships with the believers in our fellowship, especially those who are different from us. We need to sacrifice time, theology, money and effort to make unity work. We need to be committed to being friends.

Third, we need to rely on the Holy Spirit to use us and to use others to cause us to grow into that unity.

When a church does these things, I can guarantee you it will grow, because it will bring glory to God and people will see Jesus there and come to it. It will also suffer persecution, because one of the things Satan hates the most is the unity among Christians. The end result is worth it. It's worth the pain, the suffering, the joy and the glory. So let's get to it.

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<sup>7</sup> See Stephen R. Haynes and Lori Brandt Hale, *Bonhoeffer for Armchair Theologians*, 1st edition., Armchair Theologians Series (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 79–80.