

Fundamental Christian Attitudes: Unity

Selected Scriptures

90-118

Let's open our Bibles tonight, as we continue our study of the anatomy of the church, to Ephesians, chapter 4. We have been talking about the anatomy of the church, its skeleton, those things that give it its shape and its form, its rigidity, those non-negotiables, those foundational realities. We have moved to a second category in our discussion of the anatomy of the church, and we're talking about internal systems. We've talked about the fact that the life of the church is made up of certain spiritual attitudes and spiritual motivations, spiritual graces, that come from deep within. They're not external, they're internal. They're attitudes produced by the Word of God, through the agency of the Spirit of God, in the heart of God's people.

We've talked about faith and obedience, so essential. We've talked about humility. We've talked about love. And I guess, in some ways, when you've talked about those four, you have really dealt with the major issues; the major internal organs of the church can be summed up in those four incredibly wonderful virtues, and everything else sort of builds on that.

Let me bring you tonight to the fifth in my list, and if we have time, we'll go beyond that – unity – unity. Now I know that unity is not in itself a virtue, but I'm talking about the pursuit of it, devotion to it. Unity is not in itself an attitude, it is not in itself a motivation, but the pursuit of it is, the desire to protect it is, and that is what we're referring to.

If there is anything that devastates a family, it is internal discord. It's shattering. And a lot of things can produce it – pride, self-centeredness, selfishness, sin, anger, bitterness, and on and on the list goes. There are all kinds of sins that destroy unity in a family, or in a marriage, or in a business relationship, or in a friendship, or in any environment. And, of course, in the church, this is as well a very grave concern, and should be a concern for all of us, but certainly for leadership. Nothing is more frightening to me, I don't suppose, in the life of the church than division, fracture, discord, disharmony; caused by pride, self-centeredness, selfishness, anger, bitterness, sometimes caused by a competitive spirit.

Caused by personality attractions that become divisive because one identifies with one person and another with another, and the very thing that Paul addressed in Corinth has been repeated numerous times. Division in a church can be caused by a power play, it can be caused by vengeance, it can be caused by envy. It just goes on and on and on. In the years that I've been at Grace Church, God has, I think, unusually protected this church from discord and disunity. And through the years, our church has stayed together, because so many people – as we are enjoined in Scripture, Ephesians 4:3 – have done this: been “diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

We have always had a commitment to this; a commitment to be a peacemaker, to find the path of peace, to find the path of reconciliation, to find the path of forgiveness, to be eager to cover a

multitude of sins, to find the path of love that pursues unity. It seems to me that we've always been eager to do that, and I praise the Lord for it. Oh, we've had our times. I can think back to three rather significant disruptions of the unity of this church. The first one when I had been here, oh, I guess ten years, something like that – I can't remember the dates, isn't that good? A terrible assault on the unity of this church, focusing its attention on attacking me, and attacking the character of leadership in the church.

Such a mutiny coming from staff individuals, pastoral people, and particularly those into whose life I had poured myself personally. I'll never forget walking into a meeting of men who were my own personal partners in ministry, whom I had disciplined for a number of years, and saying, "I want to tell you how much your love means," and hearing in retort, "If you think we're your friends, you've got another think coming." And then they articulated the mutiny. And before it was done, three of those young men were out of the ministry permanently, for life, and many hearts were broken. And those things are heartbreaking, and painful, and agonizing, for the one who seeks the unity of the church.

I can think about a time maybe ten years ago, when that repeated itself in a rather severe occasion when somewhere between two and three hundred people left this church, and really couldn't articulate why. But seeds of discord, and distrust, and confusion, and chaos had been efficiently sown in their hearts, to the point where their confusion caused them to run – and not to run, in all cases, quietly, but with some rather blanket kind of generic accusations. At the last count of those 200-plus people, we think about 150 of you have come back, for which we thank the Lord. Of those four men who struck that sort of mutinous chord early on in my ministry here, each one individually has come back with tears, and sought forgiveness, and we have embraced, and I thank the Lord for that. But there's nothing more painful.

Our church right now is enjoying a tremendous measure of unity. Our church is flourishing in the expression of mutual love and oneness. We are washing each other's feet. There is real humility in the lives of many people. But it is so fragile, and I'm always looking around the next corner, understanding that whatever it is that God puts together, Satan wants to tear apart. And it is not easy to keep "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." You will notice in verse 3 that one must be diligent to do that. You have to understand that the goal is to maintain the unity. The goal is not to side with who might have been right, or who might have been wronged.

The goal is not to get your pound of flesh and make somebody pay, because of some imagined or even real mistreatment. The goal is not to make sure that everybody understands that you're fed up. The goal is unity – unity – unity – unity. And that means that you must recognize that the path to unity is the path of peace. You do everything to pursue the peace. Laying a foundation for this injunction, the apostle Paul writes, in verse 4 of Ephesians 4, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all." And there is a passage that celebrates unity.

Verse 4 is the Spirit's verse. It is the Spirit who places us into the body of Christ. It is the one same Spirit who comes to dwell in us. It is the Spirit who guarantees our future inheritance. He is the *arrabōn*, who secures the hope of our calling. And there is one Lord, one Christ, one Savior, one Redeemer. One faith – that is, one set of objective facts about Him and His work that are saving truths when applied to the faithful heart. There is one baptism, and that I believe to be the expression, the public expression of confession of faith in baptism that is associated with salvation. And so that verse 5 is the Lord's verse, and then verse 6 is God the Father's verse: "One God and

Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”

And the implication is if there is one Spirit working in every believer, if there is one Lord to whom we've all come, if there is one God and Father over all of us, then if anything is true about the church, it is that it must maintain its unity. We are one body – one body. Not at the expense of truth, and not at the expense of iniquity. We do not unite around confusion, we unite around the truth. It is a unity built on truth. It is the unity of the faith – the unity of the faith – as well as the unity of the Spirit. It is that unity which belongs to us because we possess the same life of God – the same living Christ – the same Spirit of Christ, as Paul identifies Him in Romans 8. It is the unity of a common understanding of Scripture and the Word of God.

There is a drive today in evangelicalism – and what a bland term that has become. But there is a drive in evangelicalism for an ecumenism that ignores sound doctrine, that overlooks error, and accepts even what we would deem as heresy. There is a kind of evangelical ecumenism that says we're all one, and we need to enjoy one another without regard for any of our doctrinal differences. That is a false, and unbiblical, and displeasing unity, if indeed it is unity at all, in the sense that it dishonors and displeases the Lord. There is another kind of striving for unity that wants to disregard iniquity, and embrace everybody no matter whether they are walking in obedience to the Word of God or not, overlooking their sin and their iniquity.

But quite the contrary – the Scripture says if there is someone in your midst, according to Titus chapter 3, teaching error, if there is a heretic there, admonish him once, admonish him twice, and then put him out. He's forfeited a right to lay any claim to acceptance within that unity. And if there is a brother or sister in iniquity, you go to him or her, and you go through a process calling them to repentance. And if they do not repent, you put them out. And the apostle Paul reminds the Thessalonians of what that's like. He says this, in 2 Thessalonians 3:6: “We command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you stay apart” – or keep aloof – “from every brother who leads an unruly life, not according to the tradition which you received from us” – that tradition not being some rabbinic tradition, but that tradition established by the revelation from God.

If you have someone in your church who is teaching error, you cannot have unity with that individual. If you have someone who is leading an unruly or sinful life, you cannot have fellowship with that individual. So what we're talking about here is the pursuit of the true unity of the Spirit, that belongs to those who surround the truth, and affirm it, and who live godly lives. And somebody might say, “Well, wait a minute. I remember the prayer of our Lord, and the prayer of our Lord in John 17 is that Jesus prayed for unity.” Let me talk about that, because that is one of the most abused passages in our contemporary evangelical realm. Turn to John 17.

Now, as you know by now in this series, I haven't been worrying about an outline. I've just been sharing my heart with you from various passages, and the outline is so big that there's one sermon per point, so there are no sub-points, I guess. But I do want to talk to you about those things that are germane to the theme. And in John 17, we are reminded of our Lord's concern for unity in this statement of verse 21. The Lord is praying. This is His great high priestly prayer. If you want to get that identification, back in verse 1 it says, “These things Jesus spoke, and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, ‘Father.’” And the rest of that chapter, clear down to verse 26, records His prayer to the Father.

And in verse 21, He is asking that all who are His may all be one, “even as Thou, Father, art in Me,

and I in Thee, that they also may be in us.” Now, I want to stop at that point, and just explain to you that Jesus is not wishing that everybody who becomes a Christian would get along well with everybody else. This is not a wish that Jesus wanted to have happen, asked the Father if He could pull it off, only to find out that His prayer wasn’t answered. Jesus doesn’t pray for things that don’t get answered, since He has the mind of God. So if Jesus prayed for oneness, you can know this for certain, it came to pass. It is a reality, not a wish. And He’s talking about a kind of oneness that you must understand.

He is talking about something that has to do with the very life of God, because He says here, “That they may all be one” – how – “even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee. We’re talking about a oneness of common eternal life; something that somehow approximates the real essential unity between the Father and the Son. He’s praying for a unity that is not about how we get along on the surface, but how we are made one internally. He’s talking about sharing common life, the life of God in the soul of men. In verse 23, He says it again. “I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected in unity.” It’s not a question of are we all getting along fine on the surface, are we all buddy-buddy, are we all holding hands, and swaying back and forth, and singing the same song. It’s not that.

We’re talking about something here that is supernatural. This prayer that Jesus prayed was a prayer for all those who came to Him to be given the same eternal life, to possess the same life of God in their souls, to become partakers of the divine nature, to have the indwelling of the very presence of the Spirit of God. He was praying for something that is stated as reality in 1 Corinthians, where Paul says, “He that is joined to the Lord is one Spirit.” Paul said essentially the same thing when he said, “I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I but Christ lives” – what – “within me.” When you became a Christian, God, the eternal God, took up residence in your life, and that’s true of every believer.

When you came to Christ, you became one with Him, and every believer is one with Him. And since we all share His common life, we share the same life with each other. This reality is laid out for us in explicit terms if you’ll turn over to 1 Corinthians, chapter 12 – 1 Corinthians, chapter 12. Jesus is not praying, in John 17, for Christians to get along. That is a concern, but it’s not the concern of that portion of Scripture. He is praying for something that became a reality at Pentecost and since, in that the same Spirit of God came upon believers, and continues to do so. First Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 11: “But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.

“For even as the body is one” – the body of Christ, one body – “and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized” – immersed – “into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many.” But it is one body. The prayer of Jesus is answered in that we are all one. And that spiritually organic oneness, that real unity, that like precious faith, as Peter calls it, that binds us all together in a real unity, and in a spiritually organic unity, is the basis of our practical common fellowship. But we find in this unity given to us at the point of salvation by us being placed into the body of Christ with all other believers, by us having the indwelling of the same Holy Spirit, that basis becomes the foundation on which we obey the command of Ephesians 4:3, keeping the unity of the Spirit.

It’s already there, it’s not something you have to drum up, it’s not something you have to seek, it’s

not something you have to chase, it's something you have to hold onto. It's something you have to preserve. And you do it by always recognizing that what ties us together in the practical expression of our lives, what ties us together, is the pursuit of peace. Now, I believe that is implied in John 17, in the statements that are made there – “Then the world will know that You have sent Me.” The world needs to see the manifestation of the real unity. But it is not a unity that has no regard for truth. It is a unity built around the truth. It is not a unity without regard to sin. It is a unity built around holiness.

There are a couple of passages that sort of talk about the practical aspect of this. Look with me at 1 Corinthians, chapter 1 – chapter 1, and just some practical ways that this is expressed. First Corinthians 1:10 – this couldn't be more clear, by the way: “Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree.” Did you know that it's a command to do that? That's right. That you all agree. Literally, in the Greek, “that you all speak the same thing” – that you don't have disagreements; that there be no schisms, fractures – “divisions among you, but you be made complete” – that literally means whole, unbroken – “in the same mind and in the same judgment.”

Now, that verse is so loaded. First of all, there's a negative approach – no divisions. And then the positive – all agree, have the same mind and the same judgment. You know what that means? It means you ought to think the same way. It means that you are so unified in how you think, you are so trained biblically, you are so sensitive to the Spirit of God as He reveals Himself through the pages of holy Scripture, you have been so well-taught in sound doctrine, you are so committed to that, and you are living godly and holy lives, so that you literally think the same way, and render the same judgment on the matters that confront you. No divisions. Some people think that to split the church is a virtue. It's not. It's not.

And some people might think, “Well, I'm right.” That's not the point. The point is the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace; have you've found the path of peace to keep the unity. You should all agree. There should be no divisions. You ought to be made complete, thinking the same, and rendering the same judgments. Now, let me tell you something, folks. The only environment in which that could ever happen is in an environment where people all understand the Word of God. It's the only place it can happen. Where you don't teach the Scripture with precision and care, there's no way people are going to think the same. There's no way they're going to make the same judgment on issues.

And I really believe with all my heart that one of the great blessings and benefits of a church that has clear doctrine, and clear teaching, and handles the Word of God accurately and precisely, is that it gets a legacy of unity, because the people think the same things; they render the same judgments, they agree. There might be a bit of a struggle here and there as to the wisdom necessary to make the application of the truth, but certainly you want to start with the truth. Any kind of unity where you have violent disagreement and just keep your mouth shut is no true unity. I guess in some ways it would be better than starting a war, unless you have to admonish a heretic, or confront a sinner.

Look at chapter 3 of 1 Corinthians. Paul says, “I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men but as to carnal, fleshly, as to babes in Christ.” I have to talk to you as immature, fleshy people. I can't talk to you as spiritual men. “I gave you milk to drink, not solid food.” What does that mean? There aren't milk doctrines in the Bible, and meat doctrines. I heard somebody say that one time: “There are milk doctrines and meat doctrines.” No. No, there are not. There are doctrines, there are truths, and there's a milk understanding, and a meat understanding. I can speak to you about the fact that Jesus Christ died in your place on the cross, and for some of you, you understand that only in the milk sense.

You're new, you're a babe, and you only understand that in the simplest sense. To others of you, when I talk about the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, you plunge down and maybe don't come up for weeks, because there are such profound depths to the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. Paul says, "I can't talk to you about the depths. I have to talk to you like babies. I have to give you the milk and not the solid food, because you're not able to receive it. Indeed, here's the proof: you're not able because you're still fleshly." And what is the manifestation of that? There is jealousy, and there is strife, or fighting, among you. "Are you not fleshly? Are you not walking like mere men?"

Let me tell you one of the things that contributes most directly to discord in the church is people with a shallow understanding of Scripture. That's why I say again, the legacy of solid food, of an understanding of some of the depth of the Word of God, is the unity of the faith. And everyone understanding the same, believing the same, having the same mind, making the same judgments – there's no ground for substantial foundational disagreement. Quite the contrary; to take a reductionist mentality, and say, "We want to throw doctrine out so we can get together," is the antithesis of this, and that is to sweep heresy under the rug, and think that it's not something to be considered, and to sweep sin under the rug, as if it had no negative effect.

As if the all-compelling thing was to just accept everybody, whatever they might believe, or however they might behave. Nothing could be more dishonoring to our Lord. Where there's jealousy and strife, you're fleshly and you're walking just like mere men. And here he uses the illustration of this identification with personalities: some saying, "I am of Paul," another, "I am of Apollos." I mean you just identify around some personality. I'm of John MacArthur, and I'm of Jerry Wragg, or whoever. I say that because Jerry and I have no disagreements, so you can be of him and then you'll be of me, you know? We're so blessed here to have such wonderful unity on our staff, and it's because we all understand the Word of God together.

But wherever you have this kind of discord, the Lord is dishonored, the church is severely crippled, and blessing is forfeited. And it comes from shallowness, and it comes from sin. If this great effort to create some kind of evangelical ecumenism were properly directed, if the people who are trying to orchestrate this knew what they were doing, they would understand that the path to one mind, and one judgment, and agreement, and real unity, is the path of sound doctrine. That's how you get there, and that's where it all begins; and the path of holiness. If I find that you err, according to Scripture, I must confront the error. And if you don't repent of that error, I can't let you be a part of the fellowship.

Why? Because your error will eat like gangrene, and as a result of it, some people might make shipwreck, or if we brought it into the vernacular, plane wreck of the faith. I can't expose my congregation to that. And if I don't confront your sin, a little leaven leavens the whole lump; and that doesn't produce unity, it destroys it. Look at Philippians, chapter 1 – Philippians 1:27. Just in case one verse isn't enough, I'll give you two that say the same thing. Paul, writing to the Philippians, says, "Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent."

I mean whether you're under my direct scrutiny or not, "I want to hear of you that your standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for" – what – "the faith of the gospel." What is that? Christian doctrine – "the faith" – objective, not subjective faith, objective – the faith, the content of the revealed gospel; you're standing together for the faith, for the truth. "I want to see you standing firm

in one spirit” – that’s one soul, one attitude, one mind – again, thinking the same things, believing the same things, “striving together for the faith” – as Jude calls it, “the once for all delivered to the saints faith” – the content of biblical truth.

And I say it again, I look at this movement toward unity, and it is passionately convinced that if there is going to be any achieving of unity in evangelicalism, we’ve got to make sure doctrine doesn’t get in the way – absolutely opposite the proper path, “striving together for the faith.”

Do we understand the faith? Do we really understand it? Do we grasp its great realities? When we do, when the church does, there will be the expression of that uniform commitment to the truth in the life of that church in visible demonstration of spiritual unity. That has a lot of implications – a lot of them. Unity in its visible expression has all kinds of implications.

Look at one more passage. I don’t know how many of those implications – oh, look, the time is gone – well, we had some preachers in the baptism tonight, didn’t we? Boy. So that’s what’s been going on while I’ve been gone, huh? Romans 15 – that’s okay, you’ll be back next week, and so will I – Romans 15, and see again this same emphasis. Verse 5: “May the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus” – see, the established measure is Christ Jesus, the faith, the gospel, Christ Jesus, the truth. And there it is again, “the same mind.” May I hasten to say to you that the outworking of our spiritual organic unity, the outworking of our real spiritual unity, the outworking of the life of God in our souls, the way that expresses ourselves starts with the mind.

First Corinthians 1:10, the word “mind” was used. Philippians 1:27, the word “mind” was used, sometimes translated soul. Here again Romans 15:5, the word “mind” is used. Christianity is a cognitive faith. We’re not trying to induce some kind of emotional hysteria, or some kind of emotional sentimentalism that causes people to just sort of melt together under the mass hypnosis. What we’re trying to do is to express a unity around common understanding of revealed truth, so that we have the same mind, and you can only do that when you understand truth in the same way. You know, I could spend my whole life trying to get a whole group of people this large, or a lot smaller than this, all united, and never accomplish it, if I didn’t have a common standard, like Tozer’s four thousand piano illustration.

He said if you had four thousand pianos and tried to tune them to each other, you couldn’t do it. If you had one tuning fork you could tune them all to that. And the one tuning fork to which all of your lives are tuned is the truth, the faith of the gospel. And when you’re all tuned to that, you’re all tuned to each other. We may discuss how that fleshes itself out, as I said, in the application of wisdom, but the common reality is ours. You will not achieve biblical unity apart from sound doctrine, and apart from godliness, holiness and the dealing with sin. Then when you are of the same mind, verse 6: “with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Beloved, I guess what I’m trying to say to you tonight, and have to leave out much of what I wanted to say, I guess what I really want to say to you is that whatever you do in this church, you pursue unity. And know this, know this – that if you are in discord here, and if you are at odds with this church, and if you feel yourself sort of as an adversary to this church, one of two things has intervened: ignorance of the truth on somebody’s part, or sin. Because if we all understand the same truth, then there’s really no substantial difference. If that truth has been violated by sin, it must be confronted and dealt with. But it might be that the reason you’re at odds is because you don’t

understand the truth.

I'm always amazed to see people take issue with the pastors and elders of the church, and so many times, it's because they don't understand the sound doctrine on which they act. They don't understand the underlying depth of conviction. They need instruction, and that needs to be done graciously, and lovingly, and tenderly. They need to be instructed so they can come to the knowledge of the truth. And sometimes it's because of sinful misrepresentations, sinful lies, envy, jealousies, who knows what. But pursuing the preservation of unity will put you down the path of peace, and you'll be one who seeks peace. And that means you'll seek to know the doctrinal issues at stake, and the matters of sin, whether they be in someone else's life or your own.

I want to wrap it up, our time is gone – Colossians 3. What does that path of peace look like? How do you pursue that? How do you stay on that track, to be a peacemaker? Verse 12: “So, as those who have been elect or chosen of God, holy and beloved,” here's how to stay on the path of peace. “Put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And beyond all these things put on” – what – “love.” And there we are right back to where we started this morning. Love is the perfect bond of unity. The path of peace is a path of compassion, real compassion, real tenderness, and sensitivity of heart toward everybody else.

It's a path of kindness, so that nothing unkind has a place. It's a path of humility, so that you are never the issue. It's a path of gentleness, patience, in which you bear with one another, in which you forgive each other – even those who specifically have a complaint against anyone. And your model is the Lord who forgave you. And I tell you, folks, this is something I pray for frequently. Lord, preserve the peace of this church, the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. I hear every week – every week of some effort to bring discord. If you bring discord, you don't win; you lose, and so does the church, and the Lord is dishonored. Do everything you can, with all the diligence of your heart, to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

You do everything possible within your strength to maintain unity, to pursue peace, to show compassion, and kindness, and humility, and gentleness, and patience, and bear with people, and forgive people, and put on love, unselfish, sacrificial service. And that spiritual unity will become visible, and God will be glorified. Well, let's bow in prayer. Father, such practical, straightforward truth. We thank You so much for the wisdom which You ordained, which is bound up in Your very nature and revealed in Your Word. Sometimes, Lord, those of us who have strong doctrine are accused of being divisive, those of us who have convictions about the Scripture are accused of being unloving and bringing division.

But, Lord, that's not our desire at all. We want to preserve that true spiritual unity built on truth and virtue, built on a right understanding of sound doctrine and godly living, that true unity. Lord, we will not settle for a false substitute that disregards Your truth and Your holy standard. Lord, call Your church back to that, and may it know that that is the truest expression of the spiritual unity that does exist through the Spirit. And, Lord, we do pray for this church; that You would keep us together, loving one another, pursuing the path of peace, that You might not be dishonored. And we pray that for congregations everywhere, that they may rally around the truth and virtue, around the Scripture and holiness, that You might be put on display. To that end we pray, for Christ's sake and His glory. Amen.

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