

1. How to Maintain Unity in the Church

Philippians 2: 1-4

The Philippians' struggle with unity was not unique; there were problems with unity from the inception of the church. In Acts 6:1, one of the issues was cultural. The church was caring for Greek widows and Hebrew widows; but while distributing the food, the Greek widows were being left out. Amongst the Roman Christians, there were divisions over preference (Romans 14). Some preferred to worship on Sunday, and others practiced the Sabbath day. Some ate only vegetables, and others ate everything. These differences created division. The Corinthian church was divided over the personalities and teaching gifts of their greatest teachers (1 Cor 1:12-13). Similarly, each church today has the potential of disunity over such things as ethnic culture, church culture, doctrinal differences, traditions, personality differences, and personal preferences. Disunity is something the church must be aware of and wisely labor against.

Moreover, it must be noted that unity does not mean conformity. The world wants us to be all the same. We should all have the same body type, the same skin, the same education, the same type of clothes, etc. However, in the church (and the world for that matter) God made everybody different with different roles, and these differences make the body of Christ beautiful. The eye needs the hands, and the hands need the feet. We give honor to the hidden parts like the heart and liver (1 Cor 12:23). Unity does not mean that everybody is the same but that we honor our differences and work together despite our differences.

1. To Be Unified, Christians Must Focus on the Right Resources. We have Christ who comes alongside us to help, comfort with Christ's love, fellowship with the Spirit, and Christ's tenderness and compassion.
2. To Be Unified, Christians Must Develop the Right Attitudes. We must have the same mind. The mind of a servant. We must have the same love, agape. We must be unified in soul and unified in mind with the purpose of the gospel.
3. To Be Unified, Christians Must Develop the Right Practices. We must forsake selfish ambition and vain conceit. We must in humility esteem others better than ourselves. Finally, we must look out for the interests of others.

Questions

1. How can the church walk in unity?
2. Is there any disunity in your life with family, peers, co-workers, or church members?
3. How can we learn to walk in unity, especially in the body of Christ?

2. True Christian Unity

True Christian unity comes from God, is based on Christ Jesus, and results in glory to God.

Romans 15:5-6

True Christian unity comes from God. Romans 15:5: “Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus” To say that true unity comes from God is not to say that we have no responsibility in the matter. As we’ve seen, we need to work at harmonious relationships, whether in the home or in the church. They do not happen automatically. We are responsible to pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another (14:19). We must be careful not to put stumbling blocks in a brother/sister’s way. We must be sensitive and gracious toward one another. But, having said all of that, true unity is not something that we can achieve by our efforts. True unity must come from God. So, we must seek Him for it.

Paul prays that God may “grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus” C. H. Spurgeon put it (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 47:552), “We shall be likeminded with one another when we become likeminded with Christ; but not till then.

It’s helpful to note the distinction that Paul draws in Ephesians 4 between two types of unity. In verse 3 he says that we are to be diligent “to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” But in verses 11-12 he says that the work of pastors and teachers in equipping the saints for the work of ministry is (4:13) “until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.” The unity of the Spirit already exists through the new birth. We are exhorted to *preserve it* in the bond of peace. The unity of the faith is something that we *attain to* as we mature in our knowledge of Jesus Christ. The unity of the Spirit is true of all believers by the Holy Spirit who baptized us into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13).

Questions

1. What does Paul mean when he prays that God would grant us “to be of the same mind?”
2. Does the unity of the faith grow over time as believers grow in their understanding of biblical truth about Christ? (explain)

3. Preserving Unity

To preserve the unity of the Spirit we need to understand its importance, practice the qualities that preserve it, and exert the effort to preserve it.

Eph 4: 1-3

The importance of preserving the unity of the Spirit is implied by Paul who sets it first. But, beyond that, we can specify three points about the unity of the Spirit which are important:

1. To preserve the unity of the Spirit, we must understand its importance. Just before He went to the cross, Jesus prayed for all who know Him to be one (John 17). As Paul has spelled out in Ephesians 2:13-18, it was through the cross that Christ broke down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles and brought them together in the new man, thus establishing peace. Christ died to create the new man, His church. Preserving this unity is crucial. Just before He went to the cross, Jesus prayed for all who know Him to be one (John 17).
2. To preserve the unity of the Spirit, we need to practice the qualities that preserve unity. Walking in a manner worthy of the gospel call implies a lifelong process. There will be setbacks, but the overall pattern should be one of growth in these godly character qualities. Also, note that you do not need these qualities when others treat you well. You only need patience and tolerance when someone is irritating you or being difficult to get along with. While it is easier just to avoid such difficult people, Paul's appeal that we practice these qualities implies that we are seeking to work through relational differences. Several of these qualities—love, peace, patience, and gentleness—are listed as the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), showing that we must walk in the Spirit to grow in these graces. We must also have humility, tolerance, patience gentleness and love.
3. To preserve the unity of the Spirit, we need to exert the effort to preserve unity. "Being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:3). *Diligence* implies deliberate effort. It has the nuance of haste or speed, which suggests that we are not to allow disunity to fester. We are to go after it quickly. As Paul says (Rom. 14:19), "So then, we pursue the things that make for peace and the building up of one another." Diligence and pursuing both imply exerting the effort to preserve this unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. It won't happen automatically while we're passive.

Questions

1. If unity among believers is so important, how can we know when (if ever) we as individuals should isolate ourselves?
2. How can we preserve the organic unity that already exists among true believers in Christ?

4. The Basis for Christian Unity

To preserve Christian unity, we must make sure that we all are founded on the biblical basis for unity.

Eph 4:4-6

Seven elements of Christian unity:

1. Biblical unity is built on the truth that there is one body.
2. Biblical unity is built on the truth that there is one Spirit.
3. Biblical unity is built on the truth that there is one Lord.
4. Biblical unity is built on the truth that there is one faith.
5. Biblical unity is built on the truth that there is one hope of your calling.
6. Biblical unity is built on the truth that there is one baptism.
7. Biblical unity is built on the truth that there is one God and Father of all.

To apply Paul's words, we must be diligent to preserve the true unity that already exists among all true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. At the same time, we must be careful not to water down, compromise, or set aside these fundamental elements that form the basis for true Christian unity. We are *not* one with those who deny or pervert the gospel. To act as if we are causes great confusion and harm. It causes undiscerning believers to fall into serious error. It causes unbelievers confusion about the gospel, by which alone they might be saved. To preserve Christian unity, we must make sure that we are founded on the biblical basis for unity, these truths that Paul sets forth here.

Questions

1. Are there different levels of unity or fellowship within the Body of Christ?
2. Can we have fellowship on an individual level that might not be advisable on a church level?
3. Which is more important: love or truth? (Yes, this is a trick question!)