

The Body of Christ Series

Lesson Five: Unity in The Body of Christ

Biblical Text(s): *“Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one” (John 17:11).*

How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity! (Psalm 133:1)

Introduction and quick summary of last week’s lessons

As we discussed last week, we belong to the church, which is the body of Christ. Yet, just as our human body is made up of various parts with their separate functions, so each of us has our own separate gifts that we contribute to the functioning of the church. For the body to function smoothly, however, we must work together in unity. As we consider “Unity in the Body of Christ,” our discussion will focus on

- (1) the importance that God places on unity,
- (2) our attitude as we pursue unity, and
- (3) obstacles to unity.

The beauty of unity, not uniformity, is portrayed all around us. Consider the contribution of different voices to our music:

Possible activity (or just imagine): sing a short song in unison and then in harmony...notice the difference!

There are three key teaching points we will cover in today’s lesson:

- Unity is a theme that permeates the entire Bible
- To accomplish this purpose, we must intentionally pursue unity of the Spirit
- Our human nature can stand in the way of unity.

Key Teaching Point #1: Unity is a theme that permeates the entire Bible

Deut. 6:4 - Hear, O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is One - Deut. 6:4; In contrast to pagan religions, the Judeo-Christian view of God, our creator, has always been monotheistic, yet, Genesis uses some interesting plural terms to capture his divine nature:

Genesis 1:1 – In the beginning, God (Elohim-*plural*) created (*singular*) the heavens and the earth.

The plural, Elohim, could represent

the fullness and majestic nature of the One God.

The plurals in Genesis for the one God may have served the purpose of excluding the possibility of a plurality of gods. - Everett Ferguson

Or (scholars disagree)

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the complex nature of God's unified existence (Father, Son, and Spirit)

Another interesting use of the plural:

Let *us* make man in *our* image (Genesis 1:26); Who is included in 'us' and 'our'? Early readers could only assume this was God speaking to the heavenly hosts. However, the new testament writers give a perspective that can enhance our understanding of this Genesis passage:

- "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." (John 1:1-3)
- "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:15-17).

Jewish confession (Shema):

Deut. 6:4 - Hear, O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is One (the Hebrew for One is *Echad*).
Echad – a compound unity?

Created in God's image, a man is "united to his wife, and the two shall become one (*echad*) flesh" (Gen. 2:24). The unity we experience in marriage reflects his holy image.

Unity is at the core of God's **purpose** for the church; a mystery kept hidden until Christ:

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says that God has "made known to us the **mystery** of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring **unity** to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ (Eph. 1:9,10).

"This **mystery** is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of **one body**, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 3:6).

"His intent was that now, through the **church**, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Ephesians 3: 10,11).

Some differences are essential to wholeness--as in male-female in marriage; the different parts of the human body; so also in the church. – Everett Ferguson

Suggested Discussion Questions:

- What are some other ways you see God's theme of unity at work in the scriptures, or in God's creation?

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Key Teaching Point #2: To accomplish this purpose, we must intentionally pursue unity of the Spirit

Unity of the Spirit and a spirit of unity

“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit...” (Eph. 4:2,3)

We maintain a spirit of unity through our humble and gentle attitude, but beyond that, we are to keep the unity of the Spirit. We are one body, and there is one Spirit who dwells within each of us...one Spirit, one body...imagine hitting yourself in the face...that’s what we are doing when we fight amongst ourselves.

Essential to achieving unity is the will to be united. Where this is absent it does not take much to separate and divide. Where this is present many differences can be tolerated. – Everett Ferguson

Unity is accomplished in the cross:

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility” (Eph. 2:13-16).

The reconciling work of Jesus brought together two hostile groups – Jews and Gentiles - to make them **One** in the Body of Christ. Jew and Gentile have both been reconciled to God “in one Body” through the cross of Jesus bringing to an end the hostility between the two very different groups.

It cannot be understated the hostility that existed between Jews and Gentiles. The Jews were God’s chosen and enjoyed the favor of God. Gentiles brutally ruled over the Jewish nation subjecting them to Roman laws, rules and justice. Christ broke down the barriers between Jews and Gentiles. The removal of that barrier is deeply rooted in the work of Christ to first break down the barrier between rebellious mankind to God. Christ not only destroyed the hostility between man and God, but between man and man in order to bring universal harmony. The reconciliation work of Jesus provides the ultimate bases for unity between God and man and man and man. Reconciliation with God is the basis for reconciliation and unity among human beings.

We proclaim the cross and are united with Christ in our **baptism** (Rom. 6:1-5). We also proclaim our unity in our **communion**...our common union...remembering the cross. It is the cross that brings us together due to our common need for forgiveness, since all have sinned.

It is the gospel of the cross, the good news of Jesus’ life, death, burial, and resurrection, that unites us. It is this gospel that separates the believers from the nonbelievers:

“This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God” (1 Jn. 4:2,3).

Suggested Discussion Questions:

- Does the importance we place on unity impact the way we approach our differences?

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Key Teaching Point #3: Our human nature can stand in the way of unity.

Unity is a beautiful concept on which everybody agrees...in theory.

It's in the specifics that we run into problems.

Unity doesn't just happen...it must be intentional.

Unity that reaches across our differences is not natural.

Differences and disagreements are not bad, but having a divisive spirit is...allowing our disagreements to lead to a divisive spirit is contrary to scripture:

The acts of the flesh include..."hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, envy..." (Gal. 5:19-20)

"Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness." (1 Jn. 2:9)

"Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen." (1 Jn. 4:20). It's a lot easier to love someone from a distance!

Unity may challenge our comfort zones; consider the situation in the early church:

- Jewish believers had to drop their prejudices and challenge their comfort zones to accept Gentiles into the church (Acts 15);
- This did not mean the Jewish believers had to give up being Jews (Acts 21), just that they could not impose their practices on the Gentile converts (as discussed in Galatians).

Paul straddled the line between the two: **"Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some."** (1Cor. 9: 19-22)

The first century church consisted of a broad spectrum of individuals, from

- Gentiles, like most of us, who did not grow up with the Jewish traditions and rituals; to
- Jewish believers who had been faithful followers of the Torah their whole lives.

Everyone was challenged to keep the unity of the Spirit with the rest of the believers.

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Some of the differences in the early church:

Eating meat sacrificed to idols:

Eating the meat sacrificed to an idol was seen by some to be communing with that idol-god. Paul recognized that an idol is just a piece of wood or a chunk of rock, therefore there is no significance to the meat and eating it is not a sin. However, not every believer was comfortable with this. Some believers in Rome (Romans 14) and Corinth (I Cor. 8) would not eat this meat, even choosing to be vegetarians, rather than risk eating meat that had been polluted by idol worship.

Recognizing special days:

Jewish feasts: Many of the Jewish believers had been faithful followers of the Torah for their entire lives. They accepted Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, but to suddenly give up these practices would have been very difficult from a conscience perspective...consider how difficult it is for some of us to accept changes in the Sunday night schedule. These believers continued their religious observances as a matter of conscience. Many of the Jewish believers in Jerusalem continued their observances at the temple (Acts 21). Of course, this was discontinued when the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, but it illustrates a time of transition as the believers grew in their understanding of the new covenant under Christ.

Days of Fasting(?): Some scholars believe the special days referenced in Romans 14 were special days of fasting.

These differences were significant challenges to the comfort zones of others, yet the unity of the body was maintained.

“Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters” (Romans 14:1); (Interesting to note that the ‘weak’ brother is the one most steadfast in their legalistic stance).

One “must not treat with contempt” and “must not judge” the one whose practices differ (Romans 14:3);

“Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister” (v 13).

Possible discussion questions:

- What is the Christian response when those united in Christ disagree?
- Suppose we had to work out our differences at the foot of the cross...would that location affect our conversation?
- What do you think of this statement: Would you rather be right or united? Is that the same as choosing to be right versus wrong?

Conclusion:

“Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand” (Romans 14:4)