

Unity in Our Decision

Romans 15:5-6

Johnny and Suzie to visit important historical monuments.

This past week I received an email from the American Family Association regarding an important issue affecting religious liberty and how an army trainer was teaching that certain Christian groups were considered a domestic hate group in company with the likes of the Ku Klux Klan and Neo-Nazis. So I sent our Senators an email. Here is a portion of the email letter I received in response: Unfortunately, due to the government shutdown, my office has been forced to close. This means that most constituent services have been suspended, including tours and assistance with federal agencies, and e-mails to my office will be delayed.

This shutdown is harmful to our economy - delaying small business loans and blocking exports, holding up benefits for veterans, and interrupting some Social Security claims. It is outrageous that we are in this situation.

Bipartisan cooperation to solve problems is possible. With the Farm Bill, we brought Democrats and Republicans together to help create jobs and cut spending, and the bill passed the Senate with broad bipartisan support in June. Unfortunately, the leadership in the House of Representatives has delayed action on that bill as well, and the current Farm Bill is now also expiring.

This government shutdown will create tremendous uncertainty throughout the economy. Democrats and Republicans must come together to re-open the government and work together to pass a budget that creates jobs and strengthens our economy. It can - and must - be done now!

Notice the rhetoric that if the other side would go along with the plan on the table there could be unity. Their inability to reach any agreeable decisions consequently led to the shutdown of non-essential services like national parks and tours for

Closer to home communities are divided over things like curriculum or whether a new business should be allowed to open or if a road should be rerouted.

It seems like everywhere you look people are in sharp disagreement over something leading to growing animosity and bitterness. The wedge that divides only serves to widen the gap between the two and attempts at reconciliation often lead nowhere. It is into this fray that the church has been called to be a model of unity, yet unfortunately even among churches there can be a falling-out. Sometimes they are so sharp the only feasible recourse in their minds is to split. In the end hearts are broken, feelings are hurt and God's name is spurned. In such a scenario I believe that there is a plausible solution for the church. I believe there are Biblical guidelines to follow that can avert that possibility.

Over the next number of weeks leading up to and including the first week of December we will take a look at this idea called unity. We will cover the following topics:

Unity in our decision
 Unity in our direction
 Unity in our diversity
 Unity in our doctrine
 Unity in our desire
 Unity in our devotion
 Unity in our declaration

Today we will cover the topic of unity in our decision. Take your Bibles and turn to **Romans 15:5-6**. Let's read that passage together. Take time this week to memorize it and meditate on it.

Like any other character trait or attribute, unity is a decision. It is a choice. We need to understand first of all that unity is not something that is a natural human trait. Sure we may seek unity with people

just like us, but we tend to hold at arm's length those who may be different in some way. *It's like the church I heard about in an upscale neighborhood who helped found an inner city church for African Americans. But when the inner city church wanted to join together in a mutual event, the founding church wouldn't have it because they were different.*

Let's get a working definition. According to Webster's, unity means the state of being one; singleness; the quality of being one in spirit, purpose; harmony.

From our text, the KJV uses the word likeminded, referring to something that is uniform in direction; having a common mind; unity in thought and will; thinking the same thing. It does not mean that we all think exactly alike on every matter, but that we reflect God's love through unity in areas where there may be disagreement. You can agree to disagree but you do so in love. We could spend a whole sermon on that but won't today.

Now before we go any further let's take a look at a problem for unity.

I. A PROBLEM FOR UNITY

As you can well imagine Scripture has quite a bit to say about what disrupts unity.

James 3:13-16

A. Strife is a Problem

The word selfish ambition in the NIV is rendered strife in the KJV. Strife is the act or state of fighting or quarreling especially bitterly. Strife can mean conflict and can include anger, irritation, annoyance, provocation, faction, dispute, deep resentment, contention and bitterness.

Strife is a bond breaker within a marriage.
Strife is a bond breaker within a family.
Strife is a bond breaker on a sports team.

Strife is a bond breaker in a business.

Strife is a bond breaker in a church.

Strife saps energy and enthusiasm. Instead of working toward a common goal for the common good, you're spending time doing damage control.

James says that where envy and strife is there is chaos or disorder, confusion and every evil practice. Where strife exists you will not find unity. They are two ends of the spectrum, opposites.

Proverbs 15:18a

Proverbs 17:1, 19

Proverbs 20:3

Proverbs 22:10

Proverbs 30:33

Galatians 5:19a, 20

I Timothy 6:3-5

B. Impatience is a Problem

Impatience destroys unity in the body of Christ because we won't tolerate someone who can't keep up with our expectations or who is weaker or slower or imperfect.

C. Unkindness is a Problem

A person who is unkind is inconsiderate and harsh. Unkindness destroys unity in the body of Christ by not letting people in the circle we don't like.

D. Jealousy is a Problem

A person who is jealous envies or covets or desires what someone else has. Jealousy destroys unity in the body of Christ by keeping others out of our circle to punish them for having what we should have or wish we had.

E. Boastfulness, Conceit and Selfishness a Problem

A person who is boastful is always heaping praise on himself. A person who is conceited is full of themselves with a puffed up exaggerated view of their own importance. They are self-centered, snobby and inconsiderate of others. Being boastful destroys unity in the body of Christ by setting

ourselves up as most important.

Paul wrote: **“Let nothing be done through strife or vain glory, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.” (Philippians 2:3-4)**

F. Rudeness is a Problem

A person who is rude behaves disgracefully or discourteously. Rudeness destroys unity in the body of Christ by never worrying about whether someone is hurt by what was said or done.

G. Bitterness is a Problem

A person who is bitter is resentful because someone treated them badly or they feel they didn't get what they deserved. Bitter people are usually spiteful. They are always taking to account the wrongs people have done to them. Bitterness destroys unity in the body of Christ because we allow resentment and an unforgiving spirit to reign in our heart.

H. Anger and Revenge are a Problem

Anger destroys unity in the body of Christ because we choose not to love the person Christ died for and who is part of that same body. John made it very clear when he wrote that if anyone does **“not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom we have not seen” (I John 4:20)**. He also wrote that **“Whoever claims to live in Him (God), we must walk as Jesus did.” (I John 2:6)** Unity is the direct expression of God's love in us.

This is by no means an exhaustive list. We could readily identify other traits that disrupt unity. These and other traits are reasons unity is absent in a business, a board room, a family, a marriage, or a church.

Turn back to **Romans 15:5-6**.

As I said earlier, unity is a choice, just as those

negative traits that disrupt unity. It's a matter of the will. If we choose to pursue unity, notice the path to unity.

II. THE PATH TO UNITY

Paul begins by identifying that unity comes from God. **“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity...”**

In His last words to the disciples before His crucifixion Jesus shared with them some very important truths as they ate around the table. In what has become known as His High Priestly prayer Jesus shared this thought in **John 17:20-21a**. He wanted His followers to be one just as He and the Father were one.

Just before this discourse at the last supper while on their way to Jerusalem James and John wanted Jesus to grant them the right to sit next to Jesus on thrones to His right and left. Mark records that the other 10 became indignant with them. There were several times when they argued about which one of them was the greatest.

In **John 17:20-21** Jesus discussed the matter of unity. It was a way to tell the disciples that if they wanted unity between them when He was gone they would need to understand where unity came from. The special unity that God the Father and God the Son had with each other was to be their model and it is the model for the church today. What Jesus is saying is that when He walked the earth, the work the Father did was done through the Son and what the Son did always pleased the Father. That is a description of what true spiritual unity looks like. Just as Jesus could do nothing without the Father, if we do not have a union with the Father through the Son we can do nothing. To be in union with the Father, our goal must be to do His will.

Unity then within the body of Christ is only realized when we acknowledge that unity comes from God.

The path to unity is through Him and through a union with His Son.

III. THE POWER OF UNITY

Back in **Romans 15:5** we see the power of unity.

“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity as you follow Christ Jesus...”

The KJV says it this way: **“May the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded according to Christ Jesus...”**

The NLT says it this way: **“May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other – each with the attitude of Christ Jesus...”**

Here’s the Philip’s translation: **“May the God who inspires men to endure, and gives them a Father’s care, give you a mind united towards one another because of your common loyalty to Jesus Christ.”**

Let’s understand briefly why Paul is writing about unity here in the first place and why it is essential that we understand that unity comes from God. In chapter 14 Paul wrote to them because there was a difference of opinion between Christians who were strong or mature in their faith and those who were not regarding non-essential areas. Specifically it had to do with eating meat. There was disagreement about whether or not it was okay. It was causing a strong division. Remember that the church in Rome was made up of Jews and Gentiles. The Gentiles had come from an idolatrous background where meat was offered to a pagan deity and then sold in the market. Some of the weaker Christians in the faith who came from a Jewish background wanted to retain the Jewish dietary regulations and thought it was a sin to eat meat that had been offered to an idol. They thought it was better to eat your veggies instead. The

mature Christians in the faith said what they were doing wasn’t wrong. Consequently a rift developed. Paul begins chapter 15 by saying that we should build others up rather than become a stumbling block. It doesn’t mean that the strong necessarily kowtow to the wishes of the weak, but that the mature should seek to build them up in the faith. But it also doesn’t mean that the mature should continue their actions indifferent to the weak, but should consider that what they do may be a stumbling block to their weaker brothers or sisters in the faith.

Paul says to do that we must rely on the power that comes from God in order to develop and maintain unity in the body. God will grant the power through His Spirit to establish the unity that He desires. After all, when we yield to the work of the Holy Spirit in us He develops the necessary fruit that brings unity: **“love, joy, peace, patience, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control.”**

Without the empowering work of the Holy Spirit directed by God we will not experience unity. As our verse says God grants this unity to those who follow Christ.

Now back to **John 17**. There are two more things I want you to see in Jesus’s words. It is the prayer of Jesus that we be in harmony as a body. He is praying not only for the disciples to be in unity, but He is also praying that future generations of believers also be in unity. That’s the first thing.

The second thing we see is that when the church is in unity it will result in the world taking notice and being drawn to Christ. Because the world is in such chaos, when the church is unified the world will sit up and take notice. Such power for unity only comes from God.

IV. THE PEOPLE OF UNITY

“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus...”

Such unity is to exist in the body of believers, within the church, within the context of a local assembly. It can only occur in those who have a personal relationship with Christ and then only when we are yielded to His Spirit.

I want to take you to three different passages that show different views.

I Corinthians 1:10-12

This is a sad commentary on the spiritual state of the church in Corinth. They had divided themselves according to their preferred Bible teacher. There was the group that followed Paul. He was the great spokesman of the church and after all, he started the church there so it seems only right that people should hold a special bond to him. Besides he was a gifted orator and great debater and defender of the faith. He was a brilliant man. He could keep people spell bound with his stories of missionary travels. If he had slides they would have been shown. Then there were the tales of imprisonment and beatings and how God provided. He was a master story teller. Why wouldn't you want to follow Paul?

Another group followed Apollos. We find him first in **Acts 18**. He's a scholar, well studied in the Old Testament. He's the intellectual and those who were intellectual followed him because he was learned.

Others followed Peter. He was the gritty, hard core preacher - down to earth and raw. He was the blue-collar worker turned preacher. Many could identify with him because he had been in the trenches. His hands were rough from labor, but his heart was tender to God. Besides He had personally walked with Jesus and could tell stories of Jesus healing people or calming storms or feeding thousands with

a few loaves and fish. He could talk about walking on water and Jesus fishing Him out or his denial and restoration. He actually saw Jesus ascend into heaven.

Finally, there was the pious group who only followed Jesus. After all He was the reason the church existed and the founder of the faith, if you will. **Who wouldn't choose to follow Him? But, if they followed Jesus why were they being a part of the rift?**

In **verse 10** Paul appealed to them, urging unity instead of division, and he appealed to them in the name of Jesus to knock off the divisiveness. I'm going to leave it there because in a couple weeks we'll come back to this passage.

The next passage I want you to look at is a familiar story in Acts. It bears a look at in our discussion about unity. As you will see, it is completely opposite of what was happening in Corinth.

Acts 2:42-48

Pentecost has happened, the church was born and believers in Jerusalem were growing numerically and spiritually. Notice especially **verse 44**. **“All the believers were together.”** They were united in the common goal of spiritual growth and seeing to it that those with needs had those needs met. There was a tremendous sense of unity and I want to suggest that as the world looked in on this group they couldn't help but be drawn to Christ because of that unity and many were added daily.

But something occurred along the way as the church continued to grow. They became more and more diverse and not that that is a bad thing, but we read in **chapter 6** that a rift developed in the body. There was the Hebraic Jews who were born in Palestine who spoke Hebrew or Aramaic, and there was the Grecian Jews. They were Jews born in others parts of the world and spoke the Greek Language. In their culture and attitudes they were more Greek

than Hebrew. They were different. In the early days of church growth when they sold things for the benevolent fund the Apostles distributed the funds to the needy. Apparently the Grecian widows were being overlooked. It wasn't intentional, after all there were only 12 Apostles and 7 or 8 thousand Christians in Jerusalem. The Grecian Jews thought that the Apostles being Hebraic Jews were intentionally or deliberately avoiding assistance for their widows and complained. A big conflict developed.

A simple misunderstanding or hurt feeling is all it takes for a huge falling-out. Of all places, unity should be the watchword of the church. We should continually work to develop and maintain unity in the church. **But you may be asking why is that important?**

Turn back to **Romans 15:6**. Paul reveals to us the purpose of unity in the church.

V. THE PURPOSE OF UNITY

“so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

That's the purpose. Unity glorifies God. He receives praise when we are in unity.

One author notes that “when the church glorifies such a God with one heart and mouth it transcends (rises above) all the troubles of chapter 14.”

If we truly seek to glorify God as one body, we cannot help but put aside all the pettiness that is often the cause for a lack of unity in the church. Unity brings diversity together, even when there are differing opinions on non-essential things. Just a couple chapters earlier in **12:16-18** Paul called them to live in harmony with each other **“if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”** That means you have the responsibility

to ensure harmony in the body. I have the responsibility to ensure unity in the body. It's not someone else's task, it's not just the job of the Board or Pastor. Unity in the church belongs to every one of us and it is through that unity that we glorify God.

According to the first statement in the Westminster catechism that is the chief end of man – to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. **II Corinthians 10:31** says that in everything we do we are to glorify God.

Referring back to **John 17:23**, Jesus gives another purpose for unity. When He prayed for the church throughout every generation His prayer was that the world would know that He was sent by God and that He loved them. Unity is our witness to the world that God exists and that because of the change in our heart there is a change in our behavior toward one another. Unity is a visible testimony.

Maybe you are here today and you realize that there have been times when you have been critical or angry toward someone in the body of Christ. Maybe you've been impatient or caused strife and dissension in the body. Maybe you've been bitter or rude and it's caused hurt feelings and you realize your attitudes or actions have kept the body from being in unity and unable with one heart and mouth to glorify God. What do you do? Let me close with a couple suggestions to help restore harmony through the pursuit of unity.

So what do we do to pursue unity?

VI. THE PURSUIT OF UNITY

If Christ prayed for unity and unity glorifies God we ought to do what we can to ensure it happens.

A. Repent of Your Sin

I John 1:9 “If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

James 5:16 “Confess your sins to each other...”

B. Reconcile With a Fellow Christian

Matthew 18:15 “Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.

Matthew 5:23-24 “Therefore, if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath anything against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.

Jesus is saying that before you can worship God, before you can praise God, before you can glorify God take care of any issues between you and a fellow worshipper that has disrupted unity.

In both verses He is saying that if you are the offender or the offended you are to take the initiative and seek reconciliation.

Not long ago someone I know sought reconciliation with her father with whom there had been at odds for a number of years going back to when she was a teen ager. She is someone who is growing in her faith and recognizing her sin approached him asking forgiveness for not honoring him as her father. He claims to be a Christian himself and unfortunately told her “never.” She did what she needed to do and she is free to truly and genuinely glorify God and I believe He was glorified in her act of forgiveness. How sad that because of his response they cannot share in bringing God glory together.

C. Remember That God is a God of Peace

I Corinthians 14:33a “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.”

Worship in Corinth was disorderly. People wanted to do their own thing, so Paul reminded them that God is orderly and wants harmony in worship.

D. Relinquish Control to the Holy Spirit’s

Galatians 5:16 “So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”

Galatians 5:22-23 “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”

Fully surrender to Him so that He can develop Christ likeness in you. When you do that a natural outcome will be the development of unity.

E. Robe Yourself in Christ

Romans 13:13-14 “Let us behave decently...not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful flesh.”

II Corinthians 5:17 “Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”

We should never hear that’s the just the way I am, take it or leave. If we are a new creation in Christ, then a change has come over us that should inspire us toward unity.

Unity is not some pie in the sky dream, but can be a reality in the body of Christ. We expect the world and Congress and even local communities to act like it does and not give a hoot about whether there is any unity. That’s their nature, but because we are a new creation in Christ it is not ours and God’s expectation, as was Christ’s prayer, is that that we live in unity because it is a testimony to a lost world of what change Christ can make in the hearts of people who are yielded to His control and it glorifies God. Unity is our decision.