

Pray for Unity for God's Glory

Romans 15:5-6

ABC 6/25/17

Some time ago, a Kudzu cartoon showed a church league softball game. (S 3/x) where the fundamentalists call, *Strike one! Yer out!* Those from the more liberal churches laugh at the punch line: *Boy, they're strict!*

In another Kudzu cartoon, the umpire yells, *Strike three!* Then, *Strike four! &, Strike five!* A teammate asks the Rev. Will B. Dunn. *What's going on? Isn't anyone going to enforce the rules?* The Reverend says nothing. Then in the last frame of the cartoon, the ump bellows, *Strike 96!* Rev Will exclaims, *I love playing the Unitarians!*

As those cartoons humorously point out, some Christians are so narrow-minded they'd rewrite the rules so you're out after 1 strike rather than 3. For others, who aren't really Christians at all, anything goes. But those cartoons raise a more serious matter: How narrowly or widely should Christians draw the lines of fellowship? Should we be so strict that if you don't believe exactly as we do, we won't have anything to do with you? Or should we allow 4 strikes or 5, or 96? Each year there are *unity services* held in the valley in an effort to bring many churches together. I'm not a big fan of these all faith gatherings. Why not? After all, Jesus didn't say the world will know we're Christians by our doctrinal agreement, but by our love & unity. So shouldn't we set aside our differences & come together with other faiths to show our unity? Yes & no. It's a matter of degrees. Since this is an important issue, we need to think biblically about Christian unity & how wide or narrow should it be. It's been said there are more than 33,000 Protestant denominations in the world.¹ Of course, this includes Mormons & many others that aren't Christian at all. Should we all just set aside our differences & come together under one big umbrella? If so, which or whose umbrella should that be? What is the essence of true Christian unity? In His high priestly prayer, Jesus emphasized unity among His followers. Although He prayed for joy (13), holiness, truth (17), mission (18), & love (26) it's significant He prayed for unity at greatest length. In Jn 17, He prayed,

I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, *are* in Me & I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them & You in Me, that they may be perfected in

¹ www.ncregister.com/blog/scottericalt/we-need-to-stop-saying-that-there-are-33000-protestant-denominations

unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, & loved them, even as You have loved Me (20-23).

The unity Jesus prayed for wasn't just an invisible, spiritual unity, but a unity the world can see. This visible unity among believers will make the world know that Jesus was sent to earth by the Father & that believers are the special objects of the Father's love. So this is an important subject for us to think about clearly.

As we've seen, Paul has been addressing the potentially divisive issue of how the stronger & weaker believers in Rome should learn to get along & build up one another. With strong opinions on non-essential things there's always the potential for heated debate, dissension, & division. But for Paul, it was crucial these Christians get along with one another. It's to God's glory when **Greek & Jew, circumcised & uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave & freeman** (Col 3:11) can set aside their differences & come together, united in Christ as their all-in-all. In our text today, 15:5-6, Paul offers what has been called a *prayer-wish*, a longing that came from his heart that God would grant the strong & the weak in Rome to be of the same mind so they might with one voice glorify God. As we'll see, true Christian unity comes from God, is based on Christ Jesus, & results in glory to God. **15:1-7 PRAY**

In light of Paul's insistence that both the strong & weak respect one another's views, we mustn't think Paul is praying the 2 groups come to the same opinion on these issues. Instead, he's asking God to give them, despite their differences, a common perspective & purpose. His concern isn't primarily that the believers in Rome all hold the same opinion on these things; but that they'd remain united in their devotion to the Lord Jesus & to His witness in the world.²

1. Christian Unity Comes from God. 5

To say unity comes from God isn't to say we have no responsibility for it. As we've seen, we need to work at having harmonious relationships with one another. It doesn't happen automatically. We're responsible to pursue the things which make for peace & the building up of one another (14:19). We must be careful not to put stumbling blocks in a brother's way. We must be sensitive

² Moo, p 871

& gracious toward each other. But having said all of that, true unity is not something we can achieve by our efforts. This unity must come from God. So we must seek Him for it. Let's look briefly at what unity isn't.

A. Unity isn't Organizational Unity. A number of organizations over the years have tried to create an organization unity. Entities like the *World Council of Churches* & the *National Council of Churches*. These have always been theologically liberal, down-playing doctrine for the sake of unity. (S) We as a church belong to *IFCA International* which is an association of like-minded churches, united in doctrine & practice. While organizational unity can perhaps achieve some common goals, at its essence, true Christian unity isn't organizational.

B. Unity isn't Ethnic Unity. Sometimes churches unite around a common ethnic heritage or language. While this is understandable if language is an issue, true unity goes beyond ethnic boundaries (Col 3:11).

C. Unity isn't Cultural Unity. The church growth gurus said people like to go to church with others who are culturally similar. So if you want a growing church, you need to target a certain niche & shape your church to reach that segment. So you aim at Millennials or at Gen-X'ers or Boomers or whatever different groups are out there. But that's not biblical unity either.

D. Unity isn't Conformity. Some churches have spoken or unspoken dress codes, where everyone's expected to dress or look a certain way. Or everyone has to be gung-ho about a specific ministry, or everyone has to use the same Bible translation, or celebrate the same holy days, or not eat certain things, or any number of other things. Christian unity isn't a matter of outward conformity.

True unity comes from God, who gives **perseverance & encouragement**. The phrase **the God who gives perseverance & encouragement** obviously ties back to vs 4, where Paul says these qualities come from the OT, they come from Scripture. This makes it clear that God is the ultimate author of Scripture & our unity must come from the God who has revealed Himself to us in Scripture as we grow in obedience to Him through it. Paul's repetition of **perseverance & encouragement** in connection with his prayer for unity implies that unity isn't automatic. **Perseverance** implies there

will be difficulties in relationships that need to be patiently worked through. We'll need **encouragement** from God, since there will be discouragements & setbacks. For us to **be of the same mind with one another**, we must grow in the fruit of the Spirit as we work through our differences in dependence on God.

Think about it like this: how did you come to love that your spouse? Did you go to the library & research him or her? Did you read books about them? Did you work hard to come up with a description of them? No. You walked with them, you talked to them, you developed a relationship with them, & each day you grew to love them & know them more. As we spend time with God, getting to know Him better & love Him more, our unity with each other will increase.

2. Unity is Based on Jesus. Paul prays that God may **grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus.** Spurgeon put it like this: *We shall be likeminded with one another when we become likeminded with Christ; but not till then.*³ But what does Paul mean when he prays that God would grant us **to be of the same mind?**

A. Unity isn't Agreeing on Everything. We've already encountered this phrase back in 12:16 where Paul commanded, **be of the same mind toward one another.**⁴ Paul never insisted we all think alike or agree on everything, which he knew would never happen in this life. Paul & Barnabas didn't agree on whether to take Mark on their 2nd missionary journey (Acts 15:36-40). I'm sure I don't agree with any one person on every single point of theology & practice & neither do you! Here in Rom 14 & 15, Paul recognized differences would exist between the weak & the strong. He hasn't told them to come to total agreement on every issue, but rather to be considerate of one another (15:2). So he's calling us to a unity based on our common salvation in Jesus, our shared purpose in the gospel, & our shared hope in Christ. Thus ...

³ *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 47:552

⁴ He also uses it or similar expressions in 1 Cor 1:10; 2 Cor 13:11; Phil 1:27; 2:2; 4:2.

B. Unity is In Christ. To think like Jesus did, not to please Himself but others, is how to be of the same mind with one another. It's helpful to note the distinction Paul draws in Eph 4 between 2 types of unity. In vs 3 he says we're to be diligent to **preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.** But in vs 11-12 he says the work of pastors & teachers in equipping the saints for the work of ministry is **until we all attain to the unity of the faith, & 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 (13).** The **unity of the Spirit** already exists through the new birth. We're told to **preserve** it in the **bond of peace.** The unity of the Spirit is true of all believers by virtue of the fact that the Holy Spirit has baptized us into the one body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13). The unity of the faith is something that we **attain to** as we mature in our knowledge of Jesus Christ. This is a unity of understanding or of doctrine & is referred to as something yet to be attained, since we don't have a perfect understanding of all the teachings of the Bible & therefore differ on some matters. The differences aren't desirable, we'd like to be of one mind on all doctrinal matters, but they're inevitable given our present, finite understanding of God's truth. These are matters to be worked on together & they are in areas in which we should see improvement as we mature in Christ. The **unity of the faith** grows over time as we grow in our understanding of biblical truth about Jesus. It's also helpful to understand there are different degrees of importance among biblical doctrines (Mt 22:34-40; 23:23-24). Some doctrines are absolutely essential for salvation. I don't mean you must understand all these truths to get saved. A person is saved by believing in Jesus as his Savior & Lord. The gospel is the good news that Jesus became a Man to live perfectly, die sacrificially, & rise victoriously to purchase a people out of sin into salvation for His own glory. We become His people by turning from our self & sin to trust in Him alone as the righteousness to get to God, the redemption paid for our sins, & the resurrection we look toward in the future. We bank our hopes now & forever on the Person & work of Jesus & we gladly follow Him as Lord. That's what it means to be a Christian. & as Christians who receive that forgiveness & love from Christ, we become people who show that to each other. To deny these truths knowingly is to deny the Christian faith. All true believers affirm these truths, which include:

- The divine inspiration & authority of the Bible;
- The triune nature of the one God as 3 Persons: Father, Son, & Holy Spirit;
- God as the Creator of all that is;
- The full deity & true humanity of Jesus Christ;
- The sinfulness of the human race;
- The necessity of the new birth;
- Christ's substitutionary atonement for our sins;
- Salvation by grace through faith alone, apart from works;
- Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead;
- His bodily 2nd coming in power & glory to judge the living & dead;
- Eternal glory with Him in heaven for believers;
- The personality & work of Satan.

We cannot be unified with anyone who denies these essential truths. There are other doctrines that are important for the Christian life, but they are areas where Christians disagree. There are varying degrees of importance with regard to these doctrines: some border on the essential while others are less important. I think that what you believe about the more important issues will impact the way you understand God & His ways & the way you live out your Christian life.

These important doctrines include views on:

- How to deal with trials;
- How to gain victory over sin;
- The role of psychology in Christian counseling;
- Christian marriage & family roles;
- The role of men & women in the church;
- Church government;
- The sign gifts;
- The meaning & mode & age of baptism;
- The frequency of the Lord's Supper;
- Methods to use in Christian work;
- Details about the end times.

Our level of agreement on these issues may determine how close of a personal friendship we may form with another believer. On a church-wide level, we have to think through whether the church should accept into membership the person who differs on one or more of these matters. Will accepting the person into membership lead to dissension or factions in the church? & as a church we need to decide how closely we can work in areas like evangelism, pro-life causes, or help for the homeless with other churches that differ on some of these matters. & I'll be the 1st to admit this isn't always easy to sort out.

Then there's a 3rd level of doctrine that's interesting, but not essential. These things won't affect the way you live your Christian life. They include minor details of interpretation of difficult or obscure texts. We should study these matters because they're in the Bible & we may hold personal opinions on them, but we shouldn't divide from other believers over them. Some examples include: Who were the sons of God & daughters of men in Gen 6? When will the battle in Ez 38 & 39 take place? What does 1 Pt 3:19-20 mean? What was Paul's thorn in the flesh (2 Cor 12:7)? Did Paul write Galatians to Christians in the north or south of Galatia? & we could go on & on. But the main point is that true Christian unity is based on Christ Jesus. We are **to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus.**

3. Unity Results in Glory to God. The ultimate goal or reason why we're to bear with one another, is so we bring glory to God. God doesn't want His family fractured because when we're divided we can't accomplish our purpose in life, which is to love Him & enjoy Him forever. **6**

Paul's goal is never merely good human relations, unless, of course, we define good human relations as God-glorifying, Christ-exalting relationships, which we should do. But the ultimate aim of Christ & of Paul is to display the glory of God, the beauty of God, the greatness of God, the many-sided perfections of God. All of creation, all of redemption, all of church, & all of society & culture exist to display God. Nothing & no one is an end itself, but only God. All things are **from Him & through Him & to Him** (Rom 11:36). Church worship services, SS classes, church nurseries, growth groups, evangelism, missions, all exist for this one ultimate thing: to make much of the greatness of our God. With that being said, note 2 things:

A. Unity Begins on the Heart Level, but Expresses it Outwardly. The phrase **one accord** means with one heart & is only possible when there's no contention or strife. When we don't accept each other & instead condemn others for having different opinions over these secondary issues, our worship will be short-circuited & our service will be splintered. In other words, our unity shouldn't be an outward show, while our hearts are at odds with one another. God looks on the heart. As Paul put it, our love must be **without hypocrisy** (Rom 12:9). But flowing out of hearts that are in **one accord**, we should express our common salvation in God-glorifying worship: *with one mind & one mouth we glorify God*. The main reason we should be of the same mind with one another isn't so we all will be happy & get along with each other, although that's important. The main reason for Christian unity is because it results in glory to God. To **glorify** simply means to cause people's attention to focus on God so they acknowledge Him as important. One pastor captured the meaning when he said, *Glorifying God is making God look good to others.*⁵ God's **glory** is how He shows who He is. God must be made known as the great & wonderful God He is. That takes place as we with one heart (in unity) praise Him before others with our mouths. When people from all kinds of backgrounds & personalities & ages join together in unified worship, the world will marvel. *How is it that these people who are so different all love one another?* Unified, God-glorifying worship is important for our testimony to a world that is so fractured & contentious. We must evaluate everything in our personal lives & in our church life with the question, *Does this glorify God?* In her Bible study, *Breaking Free*, Beth Moore suggests that God wants to make Himself recognizable to us & He wants to make Himself recognizable through us. She argues that, *people should recognize something about God just from watching our lives.*⁶ What do people hear from the church when we're bickering & belittling each other? How can they learn about God's glory if we aren't speaking up with one voice in order to make Him look good to others? When we bear with one another we can glorify God with one heart & mouth, thus making Him recognizable to others. We're to speak up in praise to the Lord according to Neh 9:5: **Stand up & bless the LORD your God from everlasting to everlasting.** Do you want to learn to bear with

⁵ Can't find the quote, but it sounds like John Piper

⁶ Pp 35-36

others? If so, then put up, build up, look up, read up, pray up, & speak up. As Paul says, **Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God** (1 Cor 10:31). Does my thought life glorify God? Do my attitudes glorify God? Do my words glorify God? Does how I spend my time glorify God? Does my behavior glorify God? Do my relationships at home & at church glorify God? Does my management of the resources God has entrusted to me glorify Him? Does my commitment to the church & my worship with God's saints glorify Him?

B. God is Glorified When We Worship Him in Truth. Paul says we are to **glorify the God & Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**. Paul uses that same expression elsewhere.⁷ But why does he put it that way here? It seems to me this emphasizes the fact that we're to worship not only in spirit (**with one accord, with one voice**), but also in truth (Jn 4:24). We don't truly glorify God unless we worship Him as He's revealed Himself to us in His Word.

The phrase **God & Father of our Lord Jesus Christ** emphasizes the priority of God the Father in the trinity & both the deity & humanity of Jesus. While the 3 Members of the Trinity are all equally God, there's a hierarchy in which the Son submits to the Father & the Spirit submits to the Father & the Son. Jesus is the eternal Son of God the Father, which shows that He is God (Jn 5:18). Paul's reference to **our Lord Jesus Christ** also calls attention to His deity & His humanity. He had to be both God (**our Lord**) & man (**Jesus**) to secure our salvation. God the Father is glorified through God the Son coming to be the Lord & Savior of humanity. God is glorified in His plan to reconcile sinful people to Himself.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus normally called God **Father**, although He called Him **my God** from the cross as our sins were put on Him (Mt 27:46; Jn 20:17), showing His true humanity & His dependence on God. When Jesus was on earth, He glorified the Father (Jn 17:4), which we are now to do. Just as God the Father & God the Son are one, so we glorify Him through our unified worship in spirit & in truth. Therefore, we can't join in unity with any who deny the trinity or the 2 natures of Christ, because they cannot worship Him in truth.

⁷ 2 Cor 1:3; 11:31; Eph 1:3; cf., Col 1:3; 1 Pt 1:3

True Christian unity transcends differences in race, culture, age, gender, & background. It transcends differences over secondary doctrines or practices. True Christian unity comes from God, is based on Christ Jesus, & results in glory to God. May we all grow in our understanding & practice of true Christian unity to God's glory!

Author Max Lucado has created a wonderful picture of what happens in the church,

God has enlisted us in His navy & placed us on His ship. The boat has one purpose—to carry us safely to the other shore.

This is no cruise ship; it's a battleship. We aren't called to a life of leisure; we are called to a life of service. Each of us has a different task. Some, concerned with those who are drowning, are snatching people from the water. Others are occupied with the enemy, so they man the cannons of prayer & worship. Still others devote themselves to the crew, feeding & training the crew members.

Though different, we are the same. Each can tell of a personal encounter with the Captain, for each has received a personal call. He found us among the shanties of the seaport & invited us to follow Him. Our faith was born at the sight of his fondness, & so we went.

We each followed Him across the gangplank of His grace onto the same boat. There is one Captain & one destination. Though the battle is fierce, the boat is safe, for our Captain is God. The ship will not sink. For that, there is no concern.

There is concern, however, regarding the disharmony of the crew. When we first boarded we assumed the crew was made up of others like us. But as we've wandered these decks, we've encountered curious converts with curious appearances. Some wear uniforms whenever seen, sporting styles we've never witnessed. "Why do you look the way you do?" we ask them.

"Funny," they reply. "We were about to ask the same of you."

The variety of dress is not nearly as disturbing as the plethora of opinions. There is a group, for example, who clusters every morning for serious study. They promote rigid discipline & somber expressions. "Serving the Captain is serious business," they explain. It's no coincidence that they tend to congregate around the stern.

There is another regiment deeply devoted to prayer. Not only do they believe in prayer, they believe in prayer by kneeling. For that reason you always know where to locate them; they are at the bow of the ship.

& then there are a few who staunchly believe real wine should be used in the Lord's Supper. You'll find them on the port side.

Still another group has positioned themselves near the engine. They spend hours examining the nuts & bolts of the boat. They've been known to go below deck & not come up for days. They are occasionally criticized by those who linger on the top deck, feeling the wind in their hair & the sun on their face. "It's not what you learn," those topside argue. "It's what you feel that matters."

&, oh, how we tend to cluster.

Some think once you're on the boat, you can't get off. Others say you'd be foolish to go overboard, but the choice is yours.

Some believe you volunteer for service; others believe you were destined for the service before the ship was even built.

Some predict a storm of great tribulation will strike before we dock; others say it won't hit until we are safely ashore.

There are those who speak to the Captain in a personal language. There are those who think such languages are extinct.

There are those who think the officers should wear robes, there are those who think there should be no officers at all, & there are those who think we are all officers & should all wear robes.

&, oh, how we tend to cluster.

& then there is the issue of the weekly meeting at which the Captain is thanked & His words are read. All agree on its importance, but few agree on its nature. Some want it loud, others quiet. Some want ritual, others spontaneity. Some want to celebrate so they can meditate; others meditate so they can celebrate. Some want a meeting for those who've gone overboard. Others want to reach those overboard but without going overboard & neglecting those on board.

&, oh, how we tend to cluster.

The consequence is a rocky boat. There is trouble on deck. Fights have broken out. Sailors have refused to speak to each other. There have even been times when one group refused to acknowledge the presence of others on the ship. Most tragically, some adrift at sea have chosen not to board the boat because of the quarreling of the sailors.⁸

Don't let ABC be the quarreling of the sailors which brings no glory to God. We will be successful if we're known as a people obsessed with the glory of God. If our children speak of the glory of God; if our young people love the glory of God more than the glory of sports or music or fashion or leisure; if our career people pursue the glory of God more than the glory of financial success; if our older people rejoice in the hope of the glory of God just over the horizon, that is success. I plead with you to pray with me that God stagger us with a proper sense of His greatness, & to that end that He would give us what Paul calls a **spirit of wisdom & of revelation in the knowledge of Him** (Eph 1:17). Oh, how we need to know God & to feel something of the wonder of His glory. Pray with Moses as he prayed, **Show me Your glory** Ex 33:18.

⁸ *In the Grip of Grace*, pp 140-142