

## THE JOY OF BEING ONE

I have a theory. It is a simple theory based on my observations of the Church. Here's the theory: Put two people in the same room, leaving them alone, and in time they will find something to disagree about.

I told you it was simple. The theory itself is one that I have developed over the many years that I have been in church leadership. Make a statement and someone will argue that the syntax and grammar aren't correct; plan a project and someone will find weakness in the execution. The point is, and you have to admit this is true, people in the church love to disagree (I dare you to disagree with this statement).

How easily we allow factions and strife to divide us. We are divided between the long time members and the newcomers; we are divided over the role of women in the church; we are divided between those who enjoy traditional worship and those who prefer a contemporary service. And you know something? That's okay. It is the fallout of that disagreement that we have to be careful about.

The main problem with disagreeing is that we allow those issues to taint our feelings about the brother or sister themselves. If one of you believes in the pre-Tribulation rapture and the other is an Amillennialist, can you not still be friends? If one of you is a Nonresistant peace Christian and the other believes God uses war for his purposes, do you naturally have to dislike each other? It sounds silly but we do this. We put the issue in front of us and turn off our affection for each other. And it doesn't have to be a theological issue, there are some people in the Church we simply don't like – we don't get along and so we conclude we don't have to love them.

But here's the scoop: Yes, we do! In our recent studies of Philippians we have discovered that living this life is not for ourselves but for Christ and for others. Paul taught that "To live is Christ and to die is gain" and followed that up with saying that living was good because it would help others to grow in the joy of their faith. Then in 1:27 he challenged his readers to "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."

You and I know that the chapters and verses in our Bibles are artificial, that they weren't there when Paul wrote. So the theme continues: the unity of the Church is essential to the glory of Christ and the joy of the Christian. But here Paul gets very specific about how we are to act and feel.

### 1. One with Christ

Our text begins with a reminder of what God has done for us. This is the vertical relationship each of us has with our Lord who saved us. Notice that each of the four statements in v. 1 begins with "if."

"If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion..." (v. 1).

What's missing at the beginning of the sentence is a "therefore" connecting it with 1:30. And those "ifs" are not expressing doubt; they could be translated "since." Or if we make them questions, they are the kind of questions that you would automatically answer "yes" to. Let's look at it this way: **a) Isn't it great to follow Jesus?** Yes it is. The phrase "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ" refers to our salvation experience. We have received a tremendous comfort from our relationship with Jesus. Our great consolation is that we can know God because our sins have been washed away in the blood of Jesus.

Remember when you first believed in Christ? Wasn't that a really special time? Everything was new and exciting. I was 14 when a change occurred in my life. I had been flirting with a lifestyle that was in no way healthy. My friends and I would prowls around at night looking for trouble, "to be chased" as one friend put it. And one night we were pursued after vandalizing someone's property. After a brush

with the police that night, I decided I had had enough. I didn't like where this was going. I clearly remember dedicating myself to Jesus that night.

After that my spiritual hunger took off. I read my Bible, memorized scripture, read Christian books and listened to Amy Grant instead of 92 CITI FM. My rebellion came under Christ's control and life began to have purpose.

What was your experience with Christ like? Or what is it like now? Isn't it great to be united in relationship with him? Paul assumes you would say "yes."

**b) Isn't his love all-embracing?** Yes it is! **"if any comfort from his love"** continues the thought of how great it is to be connected to the Savior of the world. This is about his love, not the brotherly love we will talk about later. This is specifically focused on the love Jesus has for us and which will never diminish because of his grace.

Phillip Yancey describes grace in his book What's So Amazing About Grace. He writes, "Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more—no amount of spiritual calisthenics and renunciations, no amount of knowledge gained from seminaries, no amount of crusading on behalf of righteous causes. And grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less—no amount of racism or pride or pornography or adultery or even murder. Grace means that God already loves us as much an infinite God can possibly love."

**c) Are you enjoying the fellowship of the Holy Spirit?** Yes you are! Paul asks, **"if any fellowship with the Spirit"**? Here's that word "koinonia" again. We could say association, communion, fellowship, close relationship, participation...one of these words must resonate with you. That's "koinonia" and it describes how very close you and the Holy Spirit really are. He partners with you on a daily basis in all the activities and ventures you find yourself in. Sometimes we look at the more charismatic side of life with the Holy Spirit and we wonder why we don't speak in tongues or heal people. But the daily realities, the struggles and the triumphs, find the Holy Spirit living in you and through you. Often we just don't recognize how he is working in us.

But remember the power that is at work within you: **"That power is like the working of his mighty strength which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms..."** (Eph 1:19-20). There is no power on earth that compares, and the person of that power lives in you.

**d) Has God shown you compassion?** Yes he has! Paul asked if we had experienced **"any tenderness and compassion."** What have we experienced in being with Christ? Have we experienced judgment and scorn from God for not measuring up to an unreachable standard?

Watchman Nee, a Chinese Christian writer, told of a new convert who came to see him in deep distress. "No matter how much I pray, no matter how hard I try, I simply cannot seem to be faithful to my Lord. I think I'm losing my salvation." Nee said, "Do you see this dog here? He is my dog. He is house-trained; he never makes a mess; he is obedient; he is a pure delight to me. Out in the kitchen I have a son, a baby son. He makes a mess, he throws his food around, he fouls his clothes, he is a total mess. But who is going to inherit my kingdom? Not my dog; my son is my heir. And you are Jesus Christ's heir because it is for you that He died." We are Christ's heirs, not through our perfection but by means of His grace. That is the compassion we are shown daily.

Paul writes that if we have experienced the same salvation through Jesus, the same love, the same Spirit and the same mercy **"...then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose"** (v. 2).

For if you have experienced these gifts, how can we not let them spill over into our relationships? To be like-minded here is to have the mind of Christ. How does Christ think of each person? To have the same love is to have the same love as Christ Jesus has for you and for everyone. How does he love us? To be one in spirit and purpose is to major on what we have in common, to respect those we disagree with, and to hold our convictions with love. To be One with Christ is to join

ourselves to his attitude, his thoughts, his love. With this in mind there is no room in the Church for hatred or dislike or animosity. It doesn't fit the Master's plan.

## 2. One with Christians

Having made his case for the vertical relationship, Paul turns to our horizontal relationships to describe what that should look like. Christ desired and prayed that we be one, united, fused together in a passion for Him. And he said, **"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another"** (John 13:34).

How are we to do this?

**a) Through shared dreams** – Paul's interpretation of Christ's command was this, **"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit..."** (v. 3a).

You are at the center of this picture. I have the responsibility in this scenario to live a life worthy of the unity of Christ's body. We don't want to misunderstand ambition here; it is selfish ambition which is the problem. Ambition can be our hopes, our dreams, and our goals. The selfish part is realizing those dreams at the expense of others, stepping on heads and hearts to get to the top. Those kind of dreams are vain and empty anyways.

Many of us have read Rick Warren's book *The Purpose Driven Life*. Warren begins his book with these words... "It's not about you. The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God."

I turned on the TV last week and the channel was CTV at around 4 pm, just so you know I didn't go looking for this. Oprah was on. Will Smith was her guest and he was talking about how he had just turned 40 in September and how he wanted to do things with purpose now. His wife, his kids – he saw his purpose in them. I thought, wow great, but it took you this long to figure it out? Then he said that he wanted to do something to serve humanity.

He's bang on. Except that in his search for the real joy of living he forgot God. Our dreams must begin with God. Serving humanity begins with God for the Christian. And as we share that dream we will discover our joy is in each other, not in career or possessions. But it begins with God.

**b) Through esteeming others** – Our unity will be strengthened as we look at each other in a new way. Paul said, **"...in humility consider others better than yourselves"** (v. 3b).

What is the status we give to each other? There is that cute little phrase J – O – Y, Jesus first, yourself last and others in between. Cute but true. Our tendency is put ourselves first and take care of our own needs, look for an opportunity to tell our own stories, or quietly grumble that no one cares about me.

Years ago, Dr. Karl Menninger of the Menninger Clinic was asked, "If someone felt a nervous breakdown coming on, what would you suggest that he do?" "If you feel a nervous breakdown coming on, I would urge you to find somebody else with a problem—a serious one—and get involved with that individual, helping him solve his problem." In helping him to solve his problem, then in reality your own problem is going to disappear. You're no longer thinking internally. You're no longer letting things gnaw at your stomach. You're no longer getting disturbed about yourself because you're not thinking about yourself. You're thinking about others. I don't know what your objective in life might be, but there is something each one of us can do.

God originally designed the human being to be a creature that looked out for other human beings. Because of sin in the world we have lost that natural inclination. But we can retrain ourselves, hard as it may be, to actually put others first, and thereby discovering a satisfying and fulfilling way to live.

c) **Through carrying each others burdens** – Paul further qualified his challenge to unity by saying, **“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others”** (v. 4). The Greek may not support this thought but I think that interests can be interpreted as burdens. It can be both though, interests being what aims, hobbies and goals we have, and burdens beings what concerns us, hurts us, or afflicting us. The point is to care about what others have to say.

This is nothing new for Paul to say. He told the Galatian believers, **“Carry each others burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ”** (Gal 6:2).

Recently at one of our Bible Studies I was supposed to lead another study on prayer from the Sermon on the Mount. I thought that rather than rehash all the principles and problems of prayer we should actually pray. To begin with I asked our little group of 7, “If we were to pray for you each week what you would want us to pray about? What do you struggle with? What is an ongoing issue?” Then, one by one, we shared. What I thought was an innocent question became for each one of us an emotional outpouring of our individual struggles. When it was done I asked, “When was the last time you can remember that you had the opportunity to do this?” No one could think of such a time.

Asking “How are you doing?” in the foyer is insufficient if we truly care about each other. We need to sit down and listen to each other. Anyone can do this: Sit a fellow believer down in a private place and ask, “If I were to pray for you this week what would you want me to pray?” You will be overwhelmed by the reply but don’t be surprised or shocked. That little question will unlock a door of pain and you would do well to listen. That door needs to be opened. That heart needs to be cared for and prayed about. If enough of us would do this we might all get a turn to share our hearts. But someone has to start.

Unity in the Church means a unity of hearts. It is everyone’s responsibility to care for everyone else’s hearts.

## Conclusion

You may have noticed that the key to unity, the joy of being one, begins with our vertical relationship with God. We are reminded that what joins us as a people of faith is that we share our faith, our belief that Jesus died and rose again for each one of us.

You may have noticed also that the key to unity is a proper understanding and appreciation of our horizontal relationships. The love we have experienced through Jesus Christ is the same love we are to have for each other. He modeled that love for us to imitate.

So then you may have noticed that when the vertical relationship and the horizontal relationships are as they ought to be they form a cross (see image). The cross is the symbol of perfect love when Jesus died for you and me. If we are to bear this cross, be people of the cross, then we need to learn to love each other. Even the difficult brothers or sisters among us must be loved with the love Christ showed to us. This is our testimony; this is our life in Christ.

**“Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God”** (Eph 5:1-2).

AMEN