

Jerusalem Key #2: One Heart and One Soul

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AM Assembly

Introduction:

One of the most important questions churches are asking today is, "What is the difference between a strong, living church and a weak, dying church?" Articles are written, books are sold, conferences held, and speeches given, all trying to answer this question. Everyone has their model and plan for the way a church should be run. Christians and churches have been willing to pay to hear the answers men have to offer. We, however, have been able to learn the answer without spending a dime. We know that God wrote the manual for the strong, living church, and if we simply follow it, we will be one. We have looked at the church in Jerusalem following the day of Pentecost and discovered a model of strength and life. We are striving to become the kind of church they were. We have examined their devotion to God and committed ourselves to growing in our devotion to Him. The Jerusalem church was also alive and strong because they were united, being one in heart and soul (**Acts 4:32**). Rarely do we think of the strength and life of a church in terms of its unity, but we must. We often think about size. However, the smallest church with godly unity is a powerhouse, while the largest church, without unity, is a dying church, ready to bust apart at the seams. Let's consider this "one heart and soul" in Jerusalem and what it means about a united congregation. We often think of unity as simply the idea of everyone teaching and practicing the same doctrines. Or we might dig a little deeper and think that if there are no active fights between members that we have unity. Certainly, both of these ideas will be present in a congregation of one heart and soul. But being one heart and soul has even deeper meaning than these. Consider that phrase, "one heart and soul," and what it demonstrates about that first congregation.

Discussion:

- I. The individuals realized they were part of something bigger than themselves.
 - A. The heart and soul represents the center of life and being. It is the seat of thoughts and emotions. It is the part that guides the person and directs his or her action. In that first church, rather than having 3000 hearts directing them, they were directed by one heart and soul. That is, they realized they had become part of something bigger than their individual lives.
 - B. To develop this kind of unity, we have to recognize this very difficult concept. In our American culture, the premium is placed on rugged individualism. We want a personal relationship with God. We view Him as saving us individually. That was simply not how the Jerusalem saints saw it. They placed the premium on the body, not on the individuals. Jesus was the Savior of the body, not merely of the Christians (**Ephesians 5:23**).
 - C. Too many view being part of a church like being part of a club. They join it if it complements their individuality or doesn't tax their individuality too much. They enjoy the privileges of membership as the club blesses their individual lives, and they fulfill responsibilities in the club as long as it doesn't take away too much from their individual lives and goals. But it doesn't change their individual lives all that much.
 - D. But that is not the church. It is not a club for individuals to get to associate with other individuals of common interest. It is a body. It is a whole that is bigger than the individuals within it. This is the picture that both **Romans 12:4-5** and **I Corinthians 12:12-13**. As a finger or a hand or an eye or an ear is useless by itself without the direction of the governing heart and soul, we know that as mere individuals we are useless, but need the governing guidance of the heart and soul of the body we are now members of.
 - E. Being a Christian and being a member of a local church does not simply mean being part of a club of similarly minded individuals, it means our individual lives have been swallowed up into a greater whole that is guided by one heart and one soul. And that one heart and soul is Jesus.
- II. The benefit of the body was placed above the benefit of the individual member.
 - A. In **Acts 4:32**, the practical demonstration of the one heart and soul in Jerusalem was that the individual members were selling off property to care for the other members. Do not misunderstand. This passage is not claiming everyone who becomes a Christian must sell everything he/she owns. Nor is it teaching Communism as so many want to claim. When Ananias and Sapphira sold their property and lied about its sale price, Peter made it clear they were not obligated to sell, and when they did sell, the money was theirs (see **Acts 5:4**).
 - B. We must be careful in our explanation of this because we don't know all the details about the properties sold. We don't know if they were investment properties or personal homes. We can, however, ascertain, the people

who sold their properties believed the benefit of the property to the body was more important than the benefit of the property to the individual.

- C. This is what one heart and soul means in a unified congregation. It is not merely avoiding active dissension and infighting. It is not merely believing and teaching the same doctrines. It means putting the benefit of the body before our personal and individual benefit. Too many want to be involved in the congregation until it taxes their own resources, time, opportunities. We'll do some, but don't ask too much. After all, we have our own lives that need to be preserved. Consider the beautiful example of Paul in **Philippians 1:21-24**. Paul was facing death. When he considered his own personal gain, death was greater. He would finally get to be with the Lord. But when he considered the body, he knew remaining would be better.
- D. We also see the great application of this principle for our lives in **Philippians 2:3-8**, using Jesus Himself as our ultimate example. Jesus put the church before Himself. He left the benefits of heaven and the benefits of being seen as divine behind in order to serve the church and save it. We, then, are to view other members and the body as a whole as more significant than ourselves, looking out for their interests and benefits.

III. The goals of the individuals were subordinated to the goals of the body.

- A. Bring the two previous points together and we draw a third conclusion. If the heart and soul is that representation of the center of being that governs how we live and conduct ourselves, then when the individuals bonded together into a body that did not have hundreds or thousands of hearts and souls, but only one, the goals of the individuals were subordinated to the goals of the body.
- B. All of the individuals who sold property had individual goals for those properties. They had not purchased them as investments to later sell to support other members of the body of Christ. However, now that their individual lives had been swallowed up into the life of the body, their goals changed. Their individual goals were subordinated to the goals of the greater body.
- C. While we are in the world, we have lives to lead. We have to conduct ourselves in a way that allows us to provide for our families (cf. **I Timothy 5:8**). We are allowed to have social and secular pursuits. A soldier who became a Christian (consider the centurion Cornelius) did not have to cease being a soldier or pursuing promotion in the ranks. Not everyone who became Christians quit their jobs and went on missionary journeys. When you become a member of a church you do not have to give up your educational, career, even recreational goals. But these goals need to be subordinated to Christ and to His body. These individual pursuits now take on new meaning and new purpose. Perhaps you started out to be a mechanic because you loved cars and just wanted to work in the field you loved, but now you can use your pursuit to serve brothers and sisters. Perhaps you pursued the medical field because you wanted to make lots of money or because you wanted to be known for great breakthroughs and become famous, but now you can use your pursuit to spread the gospel and provide aid to your brethren. Perhaps you purchased your house to simply provide yourself a comfortable place to live, or maybe to show a status symbol to the world, but now that you are in Christ's church it can become a place of hospitality for brothers and sisters in Christ.
- D. When the local body is one heart and soul, the goals of the individuals are subordinated to the goals of the body as dictated by that heart and soul, Jesus Christ.

IV. Their unity in Christ overshadowed their diversity of backgrounds.

- A. This church in Jerusalem was started by people from all over the known world. In **Acts 2:9-11**, we see that people had gathered for Pentecost from all over the Roman Empire. And while we don't know the specific make-up of that first church, we do know from **Acts 6:1-6**, that many who were part of that fledgling body were Hellenistic Jews. That is, they were Jews from the dispersion in all those other Roman countries and not simply native Hebrews from Jerusalem and Judea. There was a diversity of background.
- B. However, their unity in Christ overshadowed their diversity in backgrounds. When Barnabas, a native of Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean, sold his property, he didn't specify it go to other Cyprian Christians. It was for any of the brethren who had need. He wasn't supporting Cyprians; he was supporting Christians.
- C. Paul explains this further in **Colossians 3:11**. "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free: but Christ is all, and in all" (ESV). In the church of one heart and soul, we don't see nationality, skin color, hair color, gender, socio-economic status, alma mater, political party, level of education, career; we see Christ. We see people in whom Jesus resides as their heart and soul.
- D. If Jesus could bring together Matthew a tax collector and Simon a Zealot, uniting them to His cause, He can bring together white and black, Democrats and Republicans, FSU alum and USF alum and fans, Hispanic and Indian. When we are of one heart and soul, we see Jesus at the heart and soul of each other, not the surface differences of our backgrounds.

- V. Their unity put legs on the apostles' testimony of the risen Jesus.
- A. Perhaps the most shocking part of all this is that right in the middle of this discussion of their unity and care for one another, Luke records that "with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (**Acts 4:33**, ESV). What is that about?
 - B. The only conclusion I can draw is that the apostles' testimony was part of this unity and this unity supported the apostles' testimony. The apostles' could have been performing all kinds of wonderful miracles, but if the brethren who had been converted by their teaching were a disparate, fussing, fighting, bickering, selfish, group of self-serving, individualistic hypocrites, what good would the testimony of the apostles do?
 - C. The apostles' displays of power may have attracted attention, but it was the one heart and soul of the congregation that sold the teaching to the onlookers. Remember what Jesus prayed in **John 17:20-21**. He prayed for unity because the unity of His followers would itself be the greatest testimony that He was from God.
 - D. The issue of one heart and soul is not merely about our own congregational peace and growth. It is about a testimony to the world. When we are individually putting ourselves above our brethren or viewing the congregation as our servant, we are marring the testimony of the risen Savior to the world. But when we are being one heart and soul with the body of Christ and with this local congregation, we are offering a testimony that is part and parcel with the miraculous power the apostles were displaying in the name of the risen Savior. Unity matters because Christ matters.

Conclusion:

Brothers and sisters, as part of this congregation and part of the Lord's church, we are part of something bigger than ourselves. To be blunt, we are part of something that matters more than our individual selves. We must not be 350 individuals marching to the beat of 350 different hearts. If we long to have the kind of victorious growth Jerusalem did, we must learn to march to the beat of one heart, the heart of Jesus Christ. We must place the body above our individual lives, learning to subordinate our individual goals to the goal of Jesus Christ and His body, seeing our unity in Jesus as more significant than our diversity of backgrounds. Only then will the testimony of the resurrected Savior have the legs to walk through our surrounding community and draw people in to Him and His body.