

Fashioning a Unified Church

God's desire for His church is that it be unified. The Corinthians were reminded they were the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16), dwelt in by the Spirit of God. They were reminded, a few chapters later, that they were also the "body of Christ, and members individually" (1 Cor. 12:27). Both of these ideas reference the idea of unity, and that unity within a local body. The letter to the Ephesians carries much the same message. For example, Paul writes to the Christians at Ephesus and encourages them "to walk worthy of the calling with which [they] were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:1-3). Were we to glean nothing else from these passages, the fact that God desires Christians in local churches to be unified is beyond debate. Yet, so many times, local churches fall into the snares of bickering, pettiness, and disunity. How are Christians in a local church united? Is unity important? Why is that unity compromised? What can be done about the problem of disunity?

Men and women have come up with all sorts of different ideas about what it is that unites God's people together in a local body. Some see a common culture as a uniting force within a local body, thus excluding others (in NT times, think Jew/Gentile). Others see social or financial status as the uniting force (in NT times, think Corinth). What is it that unites Christians together in a local body? The Lord reveals this to us quite plainly. Unity, Paul says, comes from that common foundation of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:11). Christian unity cannot be had unless it is derived from Christ. When writing to the church at Thessalonica, Paul mentioned it was their "[receiving] the word" which brought them together as "beloved brethren... [elected] by God" (1 Thess. 1:4,6). What is it that unites men and women together in a local church? Unity is attained through mutual adherence to a recognized and accepted standard, that standard being Jesus Christ and His word.

As we think about causes of unity and disunity, it would be good to consider whether or not God actually cares about the issue. Does God care about a local church being united? One of the first passages which comes to mind is the list of the seven things which are an abomination to God, that list concluding in Proverbs 6:19 with "one who sows discord among the brethren." Interestingly, that word "discord" came into use in the 14th century and was based off of the Latin *dis* meaning "apart" and *cord/cors* meaning "heart". Literally, the idea of discord is to part the heart. What should be a whole unit is, by means of sown seeds, separated into various lesser parts. For God to explicitly note that He views this parting of the heart as an abomination should clue us in very quickly that He does indeed care about the unity of His people. Shortly before His death on the cross, Jesus prayed to His Father and said, "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I

in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me" (Jn. 17:20,21). The time leading up to the crucifixion was an important and stressful time for Jesus. Yet, we notice that, amidst all the anxiety and anguish, Jesus took time to pray for the unity of believers? Does God care? Surely this verse testifies to the affirmative! As we bring this discussion towards a more modern era, one in which local churches have been established, we find scathing rebukes handed out to the Corinthian church, in part for their disunity. Almost immediately, Paul chastens the Corinthian church for their divisions based along the lines of men (1 Cor. 1:12 cf. 4:6). Paul made it very clear to his audience that these divisions were not according to the will of God; rather, God willed that they would be "joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" based upon the message of the cross (1 Cor. 1:10,18-25). This disunity among the local church was dividing the assembly, retarding the growth of the church as a whole (3:1-4), perverting the Lord's Supper (11:22), and making a mockery of the assembly (1 Cor. 14). Does God care about the unity of his people? Whether we are talking about Christians as a whole or the local church, God both desires and decrees unity among His people, based upon that common foundation of Jesus Christ and His gospel.

Why do local churches find themselves ensnared by attitudes and practices which destroy unity? In some cases, it is because of personalities; such was the case in Corinth, where individuals were thinking of men "beyond what is written" (1 Cor. 4:6) leading some to become puffed up. Not only were feelings hurt in this process, but beyond that the worship of the local church was compromised (1 Cor. 11:17ff) and souls were placed in jeopardy (1 Cor. 5:6-13). A similar instance of one being ascribed too much power and influence, and thus endangering the local church, is seen in Diotrephes (3Jn 9-11). However, disunity in a local church is not always because of prideful individuals. Sometimes the destruction of unity within a local church can be due to an inefficient eldership. Elders have a divine responsibility to care for the souls placed in their charge. Paul pleaded with the Ephesian elders to "take heed to yourselves and to all the flock... to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). It is understood that Christians are to be vigilant in the care of their own souls, but elders find that task of vigilance multiplied in their own lives; not only must they care for their own souls, they must care for the souls of others. At times, it seems as though some elderships descend into nothing more than bill-payers. Certainly elders must look over all affairs of a local church, including the receiving and distributing of funds (1 Cor. 16:1,2); however, to reduce the responsibility of elders down to the administration of physical things is a grave mistake. Elders must shepherd the flock which is among them: this involves knowledge of the flock, communication with the flock, protection of the flock, and provision for the flock! When elders are actively involved in the care of those Christians whom they serve, they will be able to find the seeds of discord and deal with them before those seeds take root and defile the group (Heb. 12:15). Pride and ineffective elderships can easily destroy

the unity of a local church. One other cause of disunity we might add would be a lack of love. In writing to the church at Philippi, Paul encouraged those brethren to be in the fellowship of the Spirit, to be like-minded (2:1,2). He then ideas to personal characteristics which would prohibit that like-mindedness: selfish ambition and conceit. Interestingly, the word the NKJV translated with "selfish ambition" is in the original the word "eritheia". Of this word, Vine says it refers to "rivalry, self-will being the underlying idea in the word; hence, it denotes party-making... seeking to win followers." How many congregations can you think of which have been ravaged from the inside out by rivalry? The Holy Spirit identifies selfish ambition and conceit as barriers to Christian unity; we would do well to appreciate His warnings and work to make sure such does not occur in our lives.

What can Christians do to curb the problem of disunity which afflicts many churches today? In short, all Christians can choose to live out that good confession which we made. If that was all we said, that would be sufficient enough. However, there are times when specifics are necessary; let's look at some specific things we can do to restore unity and harmony within a local church. While the beginning of Phil. 2:3 shows us the destroyers of unity, the latter portion of the verse reveals how to foster unity. To counter the problem of rivalry and self-will within a congregation, members must resolve to become lowly, esteeming others better than self. Thayer says of this word translated "lowly" or "lowliness" that it is a "deep sense of one's own littleness". Do I view myself as a servant to all or as to be served by all? Our Lord made it very clear which choice we should make when he washed the feet of His disciples (Jn. 13:12-17). It is not, however, enough just to take a lowly view of myself; Paul says that view, if it is to accomplish anything, must be joined by action. Having that lowly view, we should then "look out not only for [our] own interests, but also for the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4). A humble view of myself means nothing if I do not translate that into action, actively seeking the best for others. Paul then goes on, in verses 5-12, to present Jesus as the ultimate example of lowliness and love. So many seeds of discord within congregations could be plucked up and destroyed if men and women would esteem others greater than themselves. Going back to Ephesians 4, we find some more strategies for fixing the problem of congregational disunity. While talking about walking worthy of our calling, Paul mentions lowliness and then he mentions gentleness. Can my dealings with my brethren be regarded as gentle? All while being two of the most passionate and uncompromising preachers, both Jesus and Paul were described as being gentle (Mt. 11:29; 1 Thess. 2:7). Gentleness and a stand for truth are not antithetical ideas; rather, one is accomplished through the other. Am I gentle? Paul then continues in Ephesians 4:2 and mentions the need for longsuffering. We must understand that not all problems will be solved overnight; however, with continual prayer, consideration, and action, wrongs can be righted. Am I willing to suffer long to see the desired outcome realized? As he wraps up the second verse, Paul then mentions the need

to “[bear] with one another in love.” To “bear” or “forbear” with my brethren is not the idea of tolerating annoyances, but rather the idea of holding one up! Holding up my brethren requires me to esteem them highly and view myself in a lowly manner. Do I do this? How do I view my brethren? Do I serve my brethren? Am I part of the problem or part of the solution?

Unity in a local church is not a matter of choice- it is a matter of obligation. We must be willing to lay aside any hindrance to that end and clothe ourselves in lowliness and gentleness, so that the will of God might be accomplished through us. What a blessing, that we could be used by God in His service. And how petty, at times, are the things which we allow to drive us from that divine goal. May God help us to agents of Christian unity!