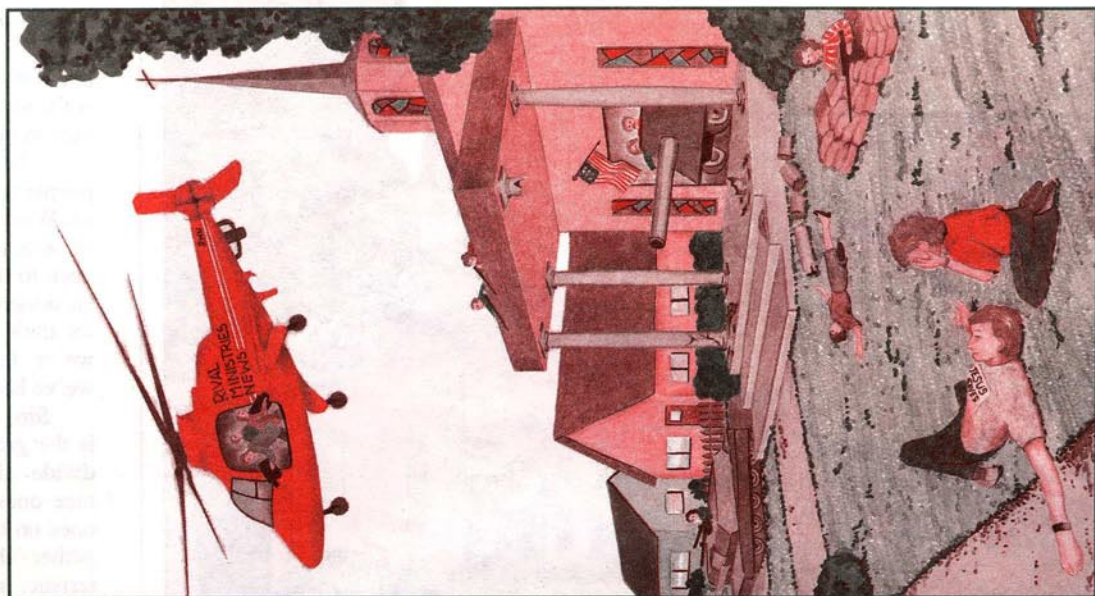


TRUE & FALSE UNITY

Are We Fighting The Wrong Battles?

by Floyd McClung



Several weeks later, five elders were arrested. The communist authorities decided to make them a public example of the consequences of being too vocal about religion. A high-ranking officer of the secret police was to interrogate them. Confident that he could get them to incriminate each other, he separated them and began trying to undermine their trust in one another. To his amazement it did not work. Every time he tried to use half-truths and innuendos from the past to divide them, each would simply reply, "I don't believe my brother would say that about me, and even if he did, I forgive him!"

Eventually the officer became so frustrated with this unusual response that he called all five men into his office and demanded to know why they loved each other so much. It wasn't long before he was on his knees, asking God to fill him with the same love.

This story inspires and encourages me because it shows five men who really failed in the area of unity and commitment, and yet were prepared to repent and forgive each other. As a result, a strong bond was formed between them that was a powerful testimony to others, withstanding even professional interrogation. They learned from their mistakes. So too must we.

In Closing

Paul describes the principles and attitudes we need to guard the unity given to us through Jesus' death on the cross. In Ephesians 4 he tells us to be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace...until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." (4:3,13) Paul compares unity of the Spirit – having the right attitude of heart and mind towards one another in spite of weakness or sin – with unity of the faith, absolute maturity and doctrinal perfection. He challenges the Church to be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit until we attain the unity of the faith.

This implies three things: 1) Unity of the Spirit must be our priority until God brings His Church to the unity of the faith. 2) We must be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit. 3) We must not insist on unity of the faith, spiritual maturity and doctrinal purity as the basis for loving others.

Unity begins with an attitude of heart that is the fruit of brokenness in our lives. God does not want us to be the judge of other people's hearts and lives. He wants us to judge our own. When we lose that brokenness, we lose our eagerness for unity. John 13 says, "By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another." If we want to be disciples of Christ we must cultivate the kind of love for each other that brings unity because "love is the perfect bond of unity." (Colossians 3:12-14)



This article was taken from "Father, Make Us One" by Floyd McClung (Kingsway). Floyd has also written "The Father Heart Of God" (Harvest House) and "Living On The Devil's Doorstep" (Word).

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I leaned forward, readjusting my position in the pew, and glanced around the room. The atmosphere was charged with excitement as we waited for the service to begin. There we were, representing 21 nationalities and about as far apart as you could be on the social, political and theological spectrum. There was a story to tell about each of us and how we came to be sitting shoulder to shoulder in a church in Kabul, Afghanistan. Anyone not seeing the Bibles carried under denim-clad arms, poking out of the top of crocodile-skin handbags or army surplus knapsacks, would wonder what on earth we had in common.

What a wonderful and unforgettable church that was. We learned to lay aside our differences and enjoy the refreshing atmosphere of spiritual unity. This unity had taken time to grow. The task of accepting one another hadn't been easy. At first, it produced some explosive moments as people tried to be selective about who they wanted to have sit next to them, or pray with, or invite out to a meal. It was hard work requiring openness, honesty, humility and determination. It was easy to dismiss as "different" someone we didn't want to get to know. But slowly cold, hard attitudes thawed as we began to relate to who we were in Christ and not on the basis of our differences. We still had our opinions but they were no longer the basis by which we evaluated and judged one another.

Only One Church

Sadly, around the world today many Christians have become so entrenched in their own opinions that they have refused the unity found in the Cross of Christ with all the healing and acceptance of one another that it brings. It's not wrong to have differing opinions but it's wrong to allow these opinions to divide and separate us.

When confronted with those who hold different views from us – from the nuclear arms race to speaking in tongues or the doctrine of eternal security – we're presented with a wonderful opportunity to check our motives. If our personal opinions hinder us from relating to a fellow Christian, then we're forced to conclude that our opinions are more important to us than fellowship with another brother or sister in Christ.

In the Western world, where too many churches have split over issues not essential to our salvation, we'd do well to ask ourselves how we would do in a country where the church is under persecution. How would we handle our differences where the option of splitting off and forming a new denomination around our opinion did not exist?

There is only one Church. But from our behavior, you'd think we believe that when we get to heaven God will divide us into different sections so we can huddle together within our little group or denomination. Worse still, some behave as if their group will be the only one there. But when we do get to heaven we'll all be one. So why not get a head start and begin getting to know Christians of other denominations and groups now?

Many people are waiting for those around them to become perfect. Others look for a perfect church. But expecting perfection in a fallen world sets us on a path of disappointment and heartache. Unity in a fallen world doesn't imply the total absence

of evil and sin, nor will it mean absolute doctrinal purity. *What unity does mean is that we have a Christlike attitude towards others when they do sin or when they are wrong, since we have placed our faith in Christ for the forgiveness of our own sins.*

Unity Is Possible

Biblical unity isn't easy to achieve, but it is possible. In John 17, Jesus prays for a unity that will transcend denominationalism

and, in some cases, our very thick-walled "non-denominationalism"! Jesus prays, "Holy Father, protect them by the power of Your name... so that they may be one as We are one." Would He bother to pray for this if it wasn't possible? Would He be so cruel as to give us the expectation that as His Church, we can live in deep love, fellowship, and trust, only to disappoint and disillusion us?

Questions of doctrine are important, but never so important that we refuse to have fellowship with Christians from another church – unless, of course, they blatantly deny one of the essentials of the Christian faith. Most Christians would agree with the saying, "In the essentials let there be unity, in the non-essentials let there be liberty, and in all things let there be charity."

Christian unity is built on the foundation of fellowship with other forgiven sinners. Nothing more is required for doctrinal unity than agreement on the essentials. The question that arises is – *what are the essentials?*

Defining The Essentials

In 1 Corinthians 15:1-5, Paul lists those doctrinal issues he considers to be of first importance, or essential, to the Christian faith. They are: 1) Christ died for our sins. 2) He is the Christ of the Old Testament scriptures, which means He is the Son of God. 3) He was raised on the third day and appeared to the disciples.

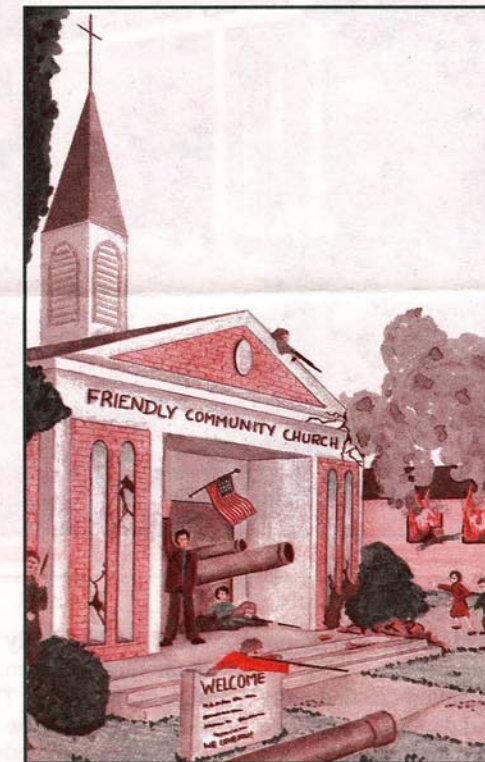
There are many important doctrines Paul left out of his list, and some very important "anti-doctrines" or heresies that he didn't mention either. His list is not complete by any means. But it's enough for biblical unity.

Counterfeit Unity

To attempt to manufacture Christian love and unity is ultimately to destroy it. True unity comes as a result of Christ's work on the cross and in our hearts. When we accept His love and forgiveness through the cross, we become brothers or sisters of all those who've done the same. But not everyone is willing to accept this kind of unity. Instead, they try to create it in human ways, by their own efforts. There are two ways in which Christians try to "create unity."

Legalism

Unity must never be confused with uniformity. The latter occurs when teachings in God's Word that are relative to a particular culture or set of circumstances are applied to all men for



all time. It also occurs when truth is applied in a harsh and unloving manner. The end product is not righteousness but legalism.

Legalism is putting trust in the letter of truth rather than in the principles underlying that truth. There are many forms of legalism, from rules about correct doctrine, church government and moral conduct to regulations about musical tastes, lifestyles and even food. Although it's right to have personal convictions, it's wrong to insist that agreement in these areas is the basis for fellowship and acceptance in love. This not only denies God's grace as the only means of salvation but also creates our own rules for holiness and spirituality. We become like the Pharisees who were so concerned with their own interpretation of the law that they were blind to the Messiah, and hindered others from seeing Him too.

Legalism causes us to become unloving and judgmental. Especially if we apply God's moral laws to the weak areas in people's lives in a harsh and unloving way. While it is not necessarily wrong to have rules that govern various areas of our lives, what often happens is that the more rules we have, the more freedom we feel we have to attack and break fellowship with those who do not keep or agree with them.

Many sects and exclusive Christian groups attempt to find unity by establishing a list of rules and doctrines and demanding they be kept with unquestioning allegiance. This isn't biblical unity, it's uniformity. Real unity is not based on agreement of doctrine, or dressing and behaving in a certain fashion. In fact, Jesus left His disciples few rules to follow. What He desired was obedience from the heart. Obviously, He affirmed the moral aspects of the law, but it was the legalistic application of the law that seemed to make Him more angry than any other sin He confronted.

Real unity is dependent on the work of the Spirit in our hearts. It's a result of building our lives on the essentials of the faith mentioned before and having right attitudes toward others. There can only be spiritual unity of the kind described in John 17 when there's freedom for diversity. If we're not mature enough to disagree and yet still love one another without suspicion and mistrust, we don't have sound doctrine. Sound doctrine always includes love from the heart toward our brothers and sisters in the Lord. The concept that sound doctrine relates to our character may be new to some, but a careful study of Paul's letters to Timothy will help clarify this. Note especially 1 Tim. 1:8-11, 4:11-16, 6:3-10, and 2 Tim. 3:12-14.

Liberalism

The second way we try to create unity is by denying the absolutes of God's Word. If legalism is making the relative teachings of God's Word absolute, then liberalism is making the absolute truths of His Word relative. The motivation for this is the fear that any doctrine or teaching that tends to be exclusive may offend or hinder those we want to include as a "brother."

There are, however, truths in God's Word that are universally and absolutely true for all men for all time. These include the deity of Christ, salvation through faith in His death on the cross, and

belief in the bodily resurrection of Christ. In their desire for the brotherhood of men, some deny the absoluteness of various teachings in the Bible. They may teach, for example, that all men are God's children – be they Buddhists, Muslims, or secular agnostics. Directly or indirectly they deny that the only way to the Father is through Jesus Christ. But Scripture makes it abundantly clear that salvation and eternal life come only through faith in our Lord Jesus, and confession of our sins (John 14:6; 17:1-3; Acts 4:12).

Some compromise the truths of Christianity in order to tolerate and accept all religions. But in doing this they become intolerant of anyone who preaches the Cross as God's provision for the salvation of all mankind. Others compromise certain aspects of the Bible's moral teaching, such as the practice of sex only within marriage. This is sometimes done to be more "loving" towards young people or to those involved in homosexuality. But when we compromise God's standards we're ultimately being unloving. The way to truly love someone in these situations is to help them see – and break through – the sin that binds their personalities and distorts their relationships. Violation of the way God intended us to live does not bring freedom but bondage, and not to tell others of this is unloving.

Through many years of working with young people I've met many who were ignorant of, or disobedient to, God's laws regarding sexual purity. I remember confronting one young couple about why it was wrong to live together outside of marriage. We talked about trust, and God's plan for secure, happy families – and how those things can only come with public commitment to an exclusive, lifelong relationship. The bond between them gradually dissolved as they honestly faced the selfish and superficial nature of their commitment. Today they are both Christians, happily married to other people and actively serving the Lord. They often thank me for helping them face the sin in their lives. Hitting them over the head with the Bible wouldn't have worked, but sharing openly with them *why* God asks us to be totally committed to another person in marriage did. With God's help I achieved a balance of tenderness



need of Him. Only in this state can we find the resources to love another human being.

The greatest motivation to love people we don't like is God's love for us. When we struggle in our response to another person, we must come back to the fact that we're all forgiven sinners. If we can't forgive another for their sin against us, then perhaps we've lost sight of just how much we've been forgiven.

Sin, and our need of forgiveness, is the great equalizer. Jesus doesn't divide sinners into categories, the nice ones on this side and the nasty ones on the other. All of us stand together, sharing one common characteristic: sin. But it's not our sin that makes it possible to love one another and enjoy unity, though a little dose of humility never hurts. It's the Cross that unites us. Through the Cross of Christ we are forgiven and accepted. And because we're forgiven we can forgive and accept others.

The Community Of God

I love the Church! And God loves the Church, too! It's alive, dynamic, growing, and powerful. The Church

is God's work, in all its forms and ministries. While church structures change according to culture, men's gifts, and what God is doing in a particular nation or group – the fact that redeemed people make up the community of God never does.

God isn't a God of methods and formulas, restricted to certain ways of working. What works in one place may not work in another. The Holy Spirit is like a wind that cannot be contained in any man's box, and the Church is so dynamic that it cannot be controlled by the theology of any one group.

We must renounce all attitudes of independence, jealousy and especially, pride. It's pride that suggests that our group or church doesn't need the rest of the body of Christ. It's pride that says we're the forerunners of the Kingdom of God in and of ourselves and that we alone are at the center of what He's doing. God is at work through many different groups, and churches, and church structures. Any attitude that doesn't promote unity – no matter how wrong we feel others are – is sin. Let's lay aside our sectarianism, fear, and pride. We belong to one another and need to start acting that way. We must reach out in a spirit of love and trust, desiring to serve and cooperate with one another.

A Story of Triumph

I want to share a true story that illustrates a point. Just after World War II in Czechoslovakia in 1947, a church just outside Prague experienced a terrible schism. Five elders fought it out, but none of them won. Consequently the flock scattered in several directions. Realizing the devastating effect of their behavior, the elders became ashamed of their actions, but were too proud to reach out to one another. After some time, one of the elders took the initiative, went to the others, and admitted his wrong. A spirit of contrition moved through the various factions in the church, and eventually unity and fellowship were restored.

and directness that let them know I was deeply committed to them, while at the same time challenging them about an area of inconsistency in their lives. It is possible to uphold a biblical standard and be loving at the same time.

God gave us the Ten Commandments for our good. To disobey them is to go against not just a set of moral laws but the very character of God. Although we can experience a high degree of love and acceptance for our fellow men, it's not possible to share Christian unity unless they have acknowledged their sin and need of forgiveness by the Lord Jesus.

Both legalism and liberalism destroy true unity and make it difficult to have real love for other believers. One adds to what Christ has done, while the other subtracts. If we're to experience true spiritual unity, it must come through the Holy Spirit and not the flesh.

Loving "Difficult" People

When it comes right down to it, we need a good reason to love some people – a very good reason! Have you ever asked yourself, "Why bother?" Most of us are busy enough, without the extra burden of working through relationship problems. Often it seems easier to chalk things up to a natural personality conflict and just stay out of each other's way. Some people are so strange that no one could get along with them. Right?

Wrong! Deep in our hearts we know the right thing to do. We must face difficult relationships and work them through. After all, if these "difficult" people are Christians, we'll have to live with them when we get to heaven, so why not start now?

To love people we don't like is one of life's great challenges. It takes extra motivation and help from outside ourselves. Pride always causes us to think we're better than others. By its very nature pride is deceptive, but never so much so that we can't gain a new understanding from God of our own sinfulness and desperate