

# UNITY OF THE CHURCH

## “that they may be one as we are one”

### Key question

What is the importance of church unity and what are its limits?

### Key text

## John 17:20-23

“I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me.”

### Introduction

1. The unity of the church is important to God.
  - a. It is emphasized by Jesus in **Jn.17:20-23**.
  - b. It is exhorted by Paul in **Eph.4:3-6** “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” . . . “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all”
  - c. Paul scolds the Corinthian church for its lack of unity. **I Cor.1-2**.
  - d. Peter reminds us in **I Pet.2:9** “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.” Just as God and Israel are one so the church should be one.
  - e. The “**body of Christ**”, “household of God” images suggest unity. Eph.2:19-22; 5:31; Col.1:13-23; I Cor.12:12-13; I Pet.2:5;
2. Four different concepts of unity.
  - a. **Spiritual unity** - The invisible universal church is unified by a common Spirit and gospel. This unity may not be experienced or witnessed in history.
  - b. **Relational unity** - Mutual recognition and fellowship between Christian groups. This may be like the kind of mutual identity that cousins in a family would have with each other. It may be very superficial. Evangelical Presbyterians and Methodists may have close fellowship on an informal basis.
  - c. **Task unity** - Frequently Christian groups might unite in a common task or ministry. In this kind of unity there may be significant differences between groups that are set aside for the purpose of reaching a common goal. Roman Catholics and Evangelical Protestants are often united in resisting abortion for example.

- d. **Organizational unity** - Political and structural links between various Christian groups. Denominational identity is an example of this kind of unity.

A. **Historic criteria for the authentic church.**

1. Prior to the Protestant Reformation four criteria marked the true church.
  - a. The **Unity** of the faith. The church is in agreement with respect to the basic tenants of the faith as it has come down through history.
    1. **Jn.17:11** “Holy Father, keep them in Thy name, that name which Thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as We are.” (17:21)
    2. **Rom.12:5** “so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”
  - b. The **Holiness** of the covenant community. The church has doctrinal, ethical, and organizational boundaries that are defended.
    1. “The gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matt.16:18; I Tim.3:16)
    2. The true church while subject to apostate teaching will never decline into total forgetfulness of the gospel.
    3. The church can never be said (in this age) to be without fault or infallible.
    4. The history of the church includes periods of varying degrees of departure from holy doctrine and behavior.
  - c. The **Catholicity** of its scope. There is but one faith community and organization that spans space and time. It is an ideal that has not yet been fully experienced but is a calling and goal.
    1. **I Jn.1:1** “that which was from the beginning which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched- this we proclaim”
    2. The scope of teaching includes all that is necessary for salvation.
    3. The scope requires a missionary extension to all cultures and places.
    4. The scope requires a sensitivity to the past heritage of the church.
    5. While holding to core orthodoxy, the church would have to be adaptable to and tolerant of various cultural expressions of the faith.
  - d. The **Apostolicity** of its leadership. There is a direct descent from Peter.
    1. The Catholicity of the church is based on the Apostolicity of its preaching and practice.
    2. **Eph.2:20** “having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone.” Eph.4:10-16
    3. The Apostolic foundation of the church includes:
      - a. Gathering – for worship, ministry, and body life.
      - b. Scattering – for spreading the message of hope to the world.
2. The Protestant standard focused attention on three issues.
  - a. The proper ministry of the **Word**. The true church teaches / preaches the Biblical message of Life in Christ and receives that message.
  - b. The proper administration of the **Sacraments**. The true church Baptizes in water and serves the Lord’s Supper.
  - c. The proper exercise of church **discipline**. The true church has moral and doctrinal boundaries that are defended.

3. The meaning of community.
  - a. The basic elements of a community.
    1. Common vision and values -
    2. Shared soul-shaping experiences -
    3. Intimate communication –
    4. Unique identity -
  - b. The United States of America illustrate these elements on a national level.
    1. At some point in the early history of the USA the independent colonies became the United States. We went from “the united states ARE” to “the United States IS.”
    2. We share a common vision expressed in our governmental system, our laws, and “the American dream.”
    3. We share common soul-shaping experiences like a civil war, Vietnam, etc.
    4. We experience a level of intimate communication through our laws, media, transport systems, common language, etc.
    5. We all claim a common name – American.
  - c. Acts 2:37-47 illustrates these elements in the early church.
    1. The Kingdom of God inspired by the Holy Spirit bound the believers to a common system of values and vision.
    2. Repentance and the Baptism with the Holy Spirit was a shared experience.
    3. The early believers were living together, even sharing material goods.
    4. The early church was identified with Christ.
  - d. The authentic church today must be (in some way) a community. It can not just have a label, or manage certain tasks, or preach a certain message.

#### B. **What is Christian unity? Rom.15:1-7**

1. “<sup>1</sup> Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not {just} please ourselves. <sup>2</sup> Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to his edification. <sup>3</sup> For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, The reproaches of those who reproached Thee fell upon Me. <sup>4</sup> For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. <sup>5</sup> Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to **be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus**; <sup>6</sup> that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup> Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.”
2. NOT UNITY OF OPINION OR PERSPECTIVE ON SECONDARY ISSUES,
  - a. There will be a diversity of motivations, ministries, and manifestations or results in the church.
  - b. There will be people at various stages of growth and understanding in the church.
  - c. Unity of opinion or perspective on every issue will require that:
    1. A dictatorial leader or tradition exists, telling everyone what they must believe and do.
    2. A self-selection process exists that will exclude all who differ in gift, temperament, level of maturity, cultural background, etc.
3. BUT UNITY OF RELATIONSHIP.

- a. Christian unity is a common spirit that networks individuals with differing gifts, temperaments, levels of maturity and cultural backgrounds.
- b. It is a gracious commitment of love that transcends cultural and growth differences.

**C. We should not confuse differing gifts with differing levels of spirituality. I Cor.12**

1. **I Cor.12:4-7** “4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. 6 And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. 7 But to each one is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”
  - a. There is no conflict of purpose or origin with various gifts but there will be a difference in ministry, effect, and passion.
  - b. Each person will have a distinct function that is needed to build up the one common church.
2. **I Cor.12:21** “And the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; or again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’”
  - a. The “eye” sees better than it does while the “hand” does better than it sees. The “head” is better at analysis, while the “feet” are better at action. But all are needed to work together.
  - b. There is always a tendency to evaluate others in terms of our own strengths.

**D. When the Scripture is not clear or when Christians differ, what do we do or believe?**

1. **THE MATURE BELIEVER** —
  - a. He is free, but willing to lay aside his freedom for others’ welfare. Unity and edification are a priority over personal privilege and selfish desire.
  - b. He is open to change and growth, but has a developing security in his convictions and understanding.
2. **THE IMMATURE BELIEVER** —
  - a. The **independent believer** — lacks love.
    1. He exercises freedom with little concern for its effect on others.
    2. He is confident, but selfish.
  - b. The **overly sensitive believer** — lacks wisdom.
    1. He is paralyzed by fear of offending a brother or sister.
    2. He lacks confidence in his convictions or wisdom in ministering to others.

**E. On debatable issues, cultivate your own convictions.**

**Rom. 14:5** “One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind.”

1. We are to live our lives, not for ourselves, but for the Lord (14:6-8).
2. We will each be responsible for giving an account to God for our lives (14:12).
3. We are to enjoy and appreciate our freedom (14:6,22).
4. We must not be enslaved to the conscience of others (Col. 2:16-23).

**NOTE:** It is important to develop your own convictions through:

- a. Adopting a proper life-focus

1. Am I a living sacrifice? (Rom.12:1-2)
2. Am I an inside-out disciple?
3. Am I open to learning and growing through change?
- b. Asking the right questions
  1. Is there anything inherently wrong with this activity? Is it lawful? (I Cor.10:23)
  2. Is it profitable for anything? (10:23)
  3. Is it edifying to anyone? (10:23)
  4. Is it self-serving at the expense of someone else's benefit? (10:23; Rom.15:1-2)
  5. Is this something I can thank God for? (10:30; Rom.14:6)
  6. Is it something that will glorify God? (10:31)
  7. Is it worth imitating by others? (11:1)
  8. Is this following the example of Christ? (11:1; Rom.15:7-8)

**F. Allow your brother the freedom to determine his own convictions — even when they differ from yours.**

1. The principle of **acceptance** — unity and the edification of others are to take precedence over my rights.
2. The principle of **accountability** — subjection to the wisdom and weakness of others is necessary for my growth.
3. The principle of **constructive critique** – There are two types of critics.
  - a. Those who want us to fail. We are foolish to take their critique too seriously.
  - b. Those who want us to succeed. We are foolish not to listen to them.

**G. Some essential definitions**

1. **Weaker Brother** — a Christian who, because of the weakness of his faith, knowledge, conscience, and will, can be influenced to sin against his conscience by the example of a differing stronger brother.
  - a. A young believer who is just beginning to experience his independence.
  - b. Recent converts from a morally lawless background.
  - c. Believers who are coming out of a legalistic background.
  - d. Believers from another culture.
2. **Stronger Brother** — a Christian who, because of his understanding of Christian freedom and the strength of his conviction, exercises his liberty with full peace of conscience without being improperly influenced by the differing opinions of others.
3. **Stumbling Block** — an action taken by a stronger brother which, though it would ordinarily qualify as a permissible act of freedom, influences a weaker brother to sin against his conscience.
4. **Pharisee** — a professing believer with strong convictions who, because of his own insecurity or pride, takes offense at those who resist his pressure to conform to his point of view.

**H. Categories of Differing Brothers**

1. **Weaker Brother**
  - a. He differs from my opinion at times.

- b. He is not fully convinced.
- c. He is sincere.
- d. He needs teaching and is open to it.
- e. He is surprised at my use of freedom.
- f. He does not think he can teach me.
- g. He is influenced by my example.
- h. I can cause him to stumble into sin.
- i. He is caused to sin by my wrong use of freedom.
- j. When I cause him to stumble, it is an “offense given.”

## 2. **Convinced Brother**

- a. He differs from my opinion at times.
- b. He is fully convinced.
- c. He is convinced and humble.
- d. He has been taught, but is open to correction.
- e. He accepts me with my differing opinion. He is willing to discuss why he differs.
- f. He is not improperly influenced by my example.
- g. I cannot cause him to stumble into sin.
- h. He is not caused to sin by my use of freedom.
- i. Since he does not stumble, there is no offense at all.

## 3. **Pharisee**

- a. He differs from my opinion at times.
- b. He is fully convinced.
- c. He is convinced and proud. He has been taught, but is not open to correction.
- d. He judges or rejects me for my differing conviction.
- e. He seeks to make me conform to his viewpoint.
- f. He is not influenced by my example.
- g. His pride will cause him to stumble.
- h. He becomes upset by my use of freedom.
- i. When he stumbles over my freedom, it is an “offense taken.”

## I. **Relating to Differing Brothers**

### 1. **The Weaker Brother**

- a. I need never give him offense.
- b. I become a willing slave to his conscience.
- c. I must limit my freedom to avoid sinning against him.

### 2. **The Convinced Brother**

- a. I will not be able to give him offense.
- b. I am free to exercise my freedom.
- c. I need not limit my freedom on his account.

### 3. **The Pharisee**

- a. I will not be able to prevent his taking offense.
- b. I will not allow him to enslave me to his standards.
- c. I may choose to limit my freedom to keep him from getting upset at me.

**J. How to Care for Weaker Brothers. Rom.14:13-15:2**

**1. Do Not . . .**

- a. Put a stumbling block in his way (14:13)
- b. Destroy with food ((14:15)
- c. Let your good thing become evil (14:16)
- d. Tear down God's work (14:20)
- e. Give offense (14:20)
- f. Cause a brother to stumble (14:21)
- g. Just please yourself (15:1)

**2. Do . . .**

- a. Walk according to love (14:15)
- b. Serve Christ (14:18)
- c. Pursue peace (14:19)
- d. Build up one another (14:19)
- e. Bear the weaknesses of the weak (15:1)
- f. Please your neighbor for his good (15:2)
- g. Edify the Weaker Brother (15:2)

**K. Relating to the Pharisee**

**1. How did Jesus relate to the Pharisees?**

- a. Jesus did not go out of His way to avoid doing things that He knew would offend the Pharisees.
- b. The Pharisees always took the initiative in the various confrontations.
- c. When questioned or accused by the Pharisees during the early stages, Jesus simply answered their questions and explained the reasons for His actions.
- d. At the point where the Pharisees began to effectively dissuade people from following Him, Jesus began to rebuke them with greater force.
- e. He also, at that point, began to warn His followers about them, instructing the multitudes in a parabolic form about their teaching.
- f. The specific instructions that Jesus gave His disciples were: Beware, and leave them alone.
- g. When Jesus challenged the Pharisees personally, the target of His attack was the content of their doctrine (i.e., when they supplanted the commands of God with their own tradition), the phoniness of their practices (hypocrisy), and the destructive effect of their influence in the lives of others.

**2. How should we respond to a Pharisee?**

- a. Beware of becoming a Pharisee (Matt.16:12; Lk.12:1; Rom.14:3). Basically, a Pharisee is one who fails to distinguish between divine principle or command and personal application. He absolutizes the application — not just for himself, but for everyone else as well.
- b. When questioned by a Pharisee, graciously explain the reasons for your convictions (Col.4:6; II Tim.2:24-25; I Pet.3:14-16).

- c. Don't capitulate to his pressure to conform to his absolutes (Col.2:8, 16-23), especially on matters of gospel principle (Gal.2:3-5).
- d. Pursue peace (Rom.12:18; 14:19). Your goal is to build him up. If he rejects your efforts to establish harmony, leave him alone and commit him to God (Matt.15:12-14).
- e. Admonish everyone in the church to beware of the dangers of Pharisaism (Rom.15:14). Instruct and exhort the Pharisee openly before the congregation of believers.
- f. When the Pharisee begins to cause spiritual damage to others, the church, and/or the reputation of the Lord, confront him privately and seek to help him change his course (Matt.18:15; Gal.6:1; I Thess.5:14; II Thess.3:14-15).
- g. If private reproof does not restore the brother, then the steps that Christ spelled out for church discipline are called for (Matt.18:15-20). The final step of excommunication is equivalent to Christ's public rebuke of those who so vigorously opposed Him (Matt.23).

## L. **What are the limits of unity? When and how is church discipline to take place?**

### 1. **Situations that require church discipline**

#### a. DOCTRINAL

- 1. "One who preaches a false gospel" Gal.1:6-9
- 2. "One who goes beyond the gospel" II Jn.7-11
- 3. "Blasphemy" (speaking with gross disrespect of God) I Tim.1:19-20 (II Tim.2:17; 4:14)

#### b. BEHAVIORAL

- 1. "Free-loader" II Thess.3:6,11,14-15
- 2. "Open immorality" I Cor.5:11
- 3. "Divisiveness" Rom.16:17

### 2. **Jesus' teaching — Matt. 18:15-17**

NOTE: This is normally the responsibility of the elders in a fellowship. I Cor.6:1-6; 2:15; 5:3,12; I Tim.1:20

#### a. Step #1 Personal reproof in private

"<sup>15</sup> And if your brother sins, **go and reprove him in private**; if he listens to you, you have won your brother."

#### b. Step #2 Include one or two more in bringing private reproof

"<sup>16</sup> But if he does not listen to you, **take one or two more with you**, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed."

#### c. Step #3 Expose the issue to the entire church

"<sup>17</sup> And if he refuses to listen to them, **tell it to the church**;"

#### d. Step #4 Let the person be regarded as an unbeliever

"and if he refuses to listen even to the church, **let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer**."

### 3. **The proper motive**

- a. Love for the offenders — Heb.12:8-13
- b. Love for the church — I Cor.5:1-13

### 4. **Unauthorized judgment by believers against one another is forbidden.** Luke 6:37

- a. We will be held accountable to our own standard of judgment. Matt.7:1-2



- b. We are not to judge the motives of others. I Cor.4:5; Jas.4:11
- c. We are to be especially patient with young believers. Rom.14:1
- d. We are not to pass judgment on others in areas of doubtful conduct. Rom.14:3,4,10,13; I Cor.8-10

5. **Some general observations.**

- a. Public exposure of sin is to be avoided if possible and then only as a last resource in bringing a person to repentance. Note the way Joseph tried to protect Mary in Matt.1:19
- b. Shame is God's tool before repentance and Satan's tool after repentance. II Cor.2:6-11
- c. Create an environment where it is safe to fully repent with the expectation of restoration.
- d. Be eager to forgive and restore penitent Christians while pressing for full repentance. Lk.15
- e. Be patient and humble realizing that we are all sinners and find holiness to be a challenge. Gal.6:1-3
- f. In I Tim.5:1 Paul tells Timothy to not rebuke an older man harshly but treat him like your father. Later in verse 19-20 Paul tells Timothy to be careful not to quickly accuse an elder but when the evidence is public knowledge that an elder is living in sin, he should be publicly rebuked. I suspect that this is because his sin is common knowledge and yet he is doing nothing about it. I doubt that Paul is advocating that all elders be publicly rebuked for every (resolved) past offense. Paul was wise in being general about the public confession of his own failures. If he were specific, he perhaps would have been put out of the ministry in the mind of some idealists.
- g. When a sinner repents, the church should rejoice and celebrate with and for the penitent sinner just as the Prodigal's Father celebrated the return of his son in Luke 15. The failure to fully recognize and affirm a penitent sinner leaves Satan an opening to use shame to keep the penitent sinner in a state of condemnation with little confidence.

M. **Final exhortations:**

1. Major on majors and minor on minors.
2. Strive to respect, receive, and love Christians who do not share your convictions on secondary issues.
3. Don't exclude Christians that differ with you on secondary issues.
4. Jesus laid aside His glory to take on our guilt and shame.
  - a. Christians are called to do the same.
  - b. We are to value relationships even at the cost of our rights.

5. **To the strong in faith**

Are you willing to constrain your liberty out of love?

**NOTE:** A distinction should be made between:

- a. The liberated — those who have liberty in Christ.
- b. The liberal — those who reflect lawless license.

6. **To the weak in faith**

Are you willing to limit your constraints to yourself?

**NOTE:** A distinction should be made between:

- a. The limited — those who are conservative in their preferences.

- b. The legalist — those who are controlling in their style.

## **Questions that you should be able to answer.**

### **1. Specific facts you should know.**

- a. What are the historic criteria of an authentic Christian church?
- b. What are the three issues that Protestant denominations identify as basic to an authentic church?
- c. What texts speak of the importance of Christian unity?
- d. Which Biblical texts instruct believers on “doubtful things?”
- e. What steps should be taken in correcting a sinning brother according to Matt.18?

### **2. Issues that you should be able to discuss.**

- a. What is the difference between a weaker brother, a stronger brother, and a Pharisee?
- b. How are we to care for a weaker brother?
- c. How did Jesus relate to the Pharisee?
- d. What are the characteristics of a mature believer’s attitude toward “doubtful things?”
- e. What are some of the unique challenges that we face as weak and/or strong Christians?

### **3. Questions you should wrestle with.**

- a. What kinds of situations require church discipline?
- b. Where should a congregation draw the line with respect to membership?