

Unity

Sunday 13 September 2009

Introduction

Genuine unity is uncommon in the world, but there is quite a lot of union, uniformity and unanimity.

Union – people in union are affiliated around a specific common goal, even though they may differ on all other things

Uniformity – everyone thinks and looks alike

Unanimity – complete agreement on every issue

We are not called as Christians to union, uniformity or unanimity. But we are called to unity / to be united. This united means to have **a oneness of heart, a similarity of purpose and agreement on a common mission.**

1. We are united in our identity as the people of God

1 Peter 2 : 9-10

- Being united starts with having a shared understanding of our identity / who we are
- We are a people, a people belonging to God, THE people of God
- This should be our primary identity and source of belonging and security, far more important than our country of birth, race or tribe, or even our physical families

2. Unity takes effort and humility

Ephesians 4 : 1 -6

- God places a high priority on unity (“Make every effort” ...) since unity is at the core of Christian community
- But achieving this unity needs us to behave in a certain way – humble, gentle, patient, bear with one another in love
- These are words that are used to prepare us for something that will be difficult !

Key lesson : True unity is difficult to achieve and will take effort and allowing the fruits of the Spirit to work within us,

3. Unity and diversity are complimentary

Ephesians 4 : 11 – 13

- Earlier verses stressed the need for unity and now Paul highlights that we are all different - we do not need to all think, act and look alike
- There is diversity in the unity that God desires. If not we would have uniformity, not unity

- This diversity is our strength – it allows us to collectively become a complete body of Christ

Key lesson : Unity and diversity are not contradictory in the church – they compliment each other.

4. Maturity and unity are closely linked.

Ephesians 4 : 14 - 15

- Once we reach unity and become mature, THEN we will then no longer be infants
- Speaking the truth in love means to speak true doctrine to each other / holding each other to the true faith.
- We are able to hold to true doctrine when we reach unity and the maturity that goes with it

Key lesson : The maturity that is needed to stand up against attacks from the world is built through unity.

Test : Are you mature as a Christian or not ?

Look at your UNITY with the rest of the body. If you are not united (one in heart, purpose and mission with the rest of the body) then you have not reached the level of maturity where Christ wants you to be.

1 Corinthians 1 : 10 – 18

5. We ARE united in Christ

- Paul's desire is that we be perfectly united in mind and thought
- This does NOT mean we need to all think alike – that would be uniformity or unanimity
- We all have the mind of Christ (**1 Cor 2 : 16**), and are perfectly united when we are all equally committed as a body to thinking as God thinks, sharing His priorities, doing His will and are being transformed together into the likeness of Jesus
- This is part of the message of the cross that is foolishness to the world – the spirit of the world is disunity, the spirit of God is unity

1 Corinthians 3 : 1 – 4

- When we quarrel and are jealous of each other, when we are not united, we behave like mere men
- We are not acting like who we ARE and what we have – the same mind of Christ

Key lesson : We need to live up to what we have already attained – we can be perfectly united in mind and thought through the reality of our new life in Christ.

6. God will punish behaviour that causes disunity

1 Corinthians 3 : 16

- This is a collective “you”. As a church community, we collectively are God’s temple – His home, the place where He lives
- The word “destroy” means to unloose or to pull apart. If anyone causes God’s temple to be pulled apart by disunity (which is the context of this passage), then he faces the wrath of God
- There is always opportunity to repent, but unrepentant divisive behaviour that results in the destruction / pulling apart of God’s community will result in facing the wrath of God.

Key lesson : God’s church / His family is sacred and special to Him and we are not to mess with it and with the unity within it.

7. Preserving unity is more important than being right

1 Corinthians 6 : 7 - 8

- Context - there were Christians in the church who had taken each other to court, and Paul here is speaking to the people who were doing the suing
- Even though they had been cheated and wronged, they themselves are now in the wrong by going to court.
- Paul tells them its better for them to be wronged than threaten the unity

Key lesson : It is better to be wronged and to maintain unity than to demand what we see as justice – putting things right for our individual sake or name. The life in Christ requires each of to die to ourselves and to put the needs of the body of Christ before our own desires and wants, and even our sense of personal justice.

*With a worldly mindset this makes no sense at all ! And if we don’t cling to **Romans 12 : 1 – 2** in which we are urged to not conform to the patterns of the world, then it will make no sense to us as well.*

8. Acting in the interests of others is more important than us exercising our freedom

1 Corinthians 8 : 9 -13

- Context - some believers would not eat meat in case it had been sacrificed to an idol, but Paul explains that Christians are no longer bound by these kinds of laws
- Even though Paul had certain freedoms in Christ (such as eating all types of meat), he chose to not exercise those freedoms in order to protect the faith of other Christians
- When we hurt the body, we sin against Christ (Paul should know – he heard it directly from Jesus on the road to Damascus. When Jesus confronted him about persecuting the church, he asked him “Paul why are you persecuting ME ?”)
- We need to put the interests of others before our desire to exercise the freedoms and rights we have in Christ

Throughout **1 Corinthians 9**, Paul uses various other arguments and examples of freedoms he has but which he does not exercise because the interests of others and unity are more important to him.

Key lesson : As Christians we are no longer under the law and have certain freedoms in Christ (as explained inter alia in Galatians 5). But if exercising that freedom may cause others to stumble or cause disunity, then we should rather not exercise that freedom.

*Once again, this makes no sense from a worldly perspective and will make no sense to us either if we do not hold to **Romans 12 : 1-2** (we are to no longer conform to the patterns of the world).*

Reflection : How do you use the many opportunities you have to express your opinions in the church nowadays – whether in small group discussions or in our family forums ?

If you have strong opinions that may cause another brother to stumble or which may cause confusion or disunity, are you willing to keep that opinion to yourself ? Or to at least test it with someone else before sharing it publicly ?

9. Love is at the centre of our unity

1 Corinthians 12 : 12 – 31, 13 : 1-3

- The body / church and Christ are referred to interchangeably and every part of the body is important
- When we do not behave in a unified way, its like saying that one part of our physical body does not need another part (which is clearly ridiculous)
- Unity and diversity go hand in hand - we can be united without being uniform
- At the centre of our unity and proper functioning as the body of Christ is LOVE for God and LOVE for each other
- Without the unifying love of God in us, everything we do or try to do will come to nothing

Colossians 3 : 11 – 14

- In Christ, there are no distinctions between different races and types of people
- Being a united people of God requires compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and bearing with one another (similar to Ephesians 4 : 2 -3)
- Love then binds and brings together all the virtues that we need for unity

Key lesson : We cannot have unity without love and we cannot have love without unity.

Conclusion

- I have not given this lesson because I think we are pulling apart or have major quarrels or disagreements
- We have come a long way as a church, and are doing well on unity compared to a year ago
- I also think we are becoming even more united, but we need to be on our guard against disunity.
- To summarise all the above points, being more united will require us to die to self more / to think of the needs of others before our own, and to allow God's agape love to fill us and flow through us even more

Test : How unified are you with the body of Christ ?

- Are you generous with your time, resources and gifts towards the body ? Or do you selfishly hold onto those things ?
- Do you guard against gossip and slander about your brothers and sisters ? Or do you speak about others in the church behind their back ?
- Do you support, hold up and seek contact with Christians in other churches ? Or do you criticise our other churches and their ways of doing things ?
- When you hear gossip or slander, do you challenge it, or do you keep quiet and just go along with it ?
- Do you make every effort to be in the fellowship ? Or do you look for reasons not to attend services, early morning prayers, family group meetings, discipling times, marriage workshops or singles hangouts ?
- If you can't make a meeting of the body, do you at least let someone know ? Do you understand or care about the effect that your absence has on the body ?
- Do you really understand that the decisions you make effect the body ? Do you ask for advice before making decisions that will affect the body ?
- Are you willing to be "wronged" in the greater interest of the body ?
- In the greater interest of the body, are you willing to put aside your desire to be publicly "redeemed" if and when you are wronged ?
- Are you allowing God's agape love to fill you and flow through you by putting to death those parts of your old nature that block the unifying work of the spirit in your life ?