

## Maine State Conference Unity

This document was originally delivered as a sermon during the 168<sup>th</sup> Annual Maine State Conference on April 21, 2017. I have edited it since then for clarity, easier reading and to fine tune some things as well. I believe the first step to unity is humility. I recognize and have no delusions to think that in my short time in this life, let alone as a pastor of a church in our denomination, that I have much to contribute to this discussion. I recognize that there are many elder statesmen that have been wrestling with this issue and its complexity. My goal is not to bring new or revelatory thoughts. My goal is not to bring my solutions. I submit to the reality that there is much for me to learn and grow into, whether I want to admit it or not. So I will do my best to avoid sharing what I think we all need to hear and instead stick closely to scripture.

At the morning of one of our Conference Board Meetings, a devotional was brought by President Davis regarding our need and desire for unity. During the ensuing discussion, someone brought up the reality that we are not called to be Borg. Now I am no “Treky,” but I understood the reference while many of you many not. The Borg are an alien race that play a recurring role in the Star Trek franchise. The Borg use a process called assimilation to force other species into their group. They do this through injecting microscopic machines called nanoprobes and by surgically adding cybernetic parts. Their drive is for perfection. To achieve their goal, they endeavor to assimilate other races. They are most notably known for their tag line of “Resistance is Futile.” When we talk about unity, we don’t mean assimilation. I am a believer that we are totally depraved and so without the help of the Holy Spirit, resistance to unity will be successful.

The reason we are talking about unity is because we have a sense that we are lacking in unity. The topic often arises in the context of there being a lack or absence of unity. Most of us wish we saw more unity, and it just seems too difficult to get a grasp on it. We like the idea of unity, but we recognize that it is difficult to achieve and we may not all agree on what it looks like practically. I want to again repeat that I am under no delusions that this piece is going to solve any issues or be a clear path forward. I also will not end with a call that it is futile to resist what I share. We can all agree that assimilation is not the goal, but unity in the midst of God working through all of us who, while created in God’s image, are also very different and unique. So, the goal is to look at what Jesus briefly says in John 17:20-23 and try and rap our hearts and minds around the unity for which Jesus prays.

That is, I think, the first point that we must understand. Jesus prays that this will come to reality indicating we are not naturally inclined to unity. If unity were natural or a given, then Jesus would not have prayed for it. So that should be an encouragement for us. Jesus prays for this reality and isn’t that who Jesus is? In this text and currently in heaven<sup>1</sup>, Jesus is praying for us. While unity seems to be just out of reach at times, we can have confidence and hope by the fact that the Savior of the world has prayed and is praying for us.

*John 17:20-23*<sup>20</sup> "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word,<sup>21</sup> that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.<sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one,<sup>23</sup> I in them and you in

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:34

*me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.*<sup>2</sup>

Jesus' final moments before His arrest are spent in prayer for His disciples, both present and future. While there may be some scholarly debate about the previous sections of what many call the "High Priestly Prayer" and how they apply to us today considering Jesus was praying for His current disciples, there is no question that these verses above apply directly to us today. Christians living today are Christians because they have believed the words and testimony of the disciples. We have their testimony in the authoritative, infallible and inerrant word of God as it has been passed down through church history through the faithful witness of the church and its disciples.

Jesus' prayer for us is that we would all be one. He describes this oneness with an analogy. He prays that we would be one, just as He and the Father are one--just as the Father is in Him and He is in the Father. Jesus also prays that we would have this same unity in Them. Now this is a bit confusing because this gets into Trinitarian theology that can confuse even the best scholars, even if they are not willing to admit it. Even with the confusion, I don't believe that Jesus is saying that the unity between the Father and the Son is the same as that which is between believers and God, but He is saying there is an analogy. The Father is in the Son and does His work. The Son is in the Father. The two are one and yet they are distinct. In measure the same is true with believers. Without losing our identity, we are to be in the Father and the Son.

Notice that a major desire in Jesus' heart is that we may have a fuller experience of the Triune God. That is the goal of all things of the Church. We long for believers and unbelievers to know and experience God. All focus of unity is not just to build oneself up in the faith or to build a church, but that God would be known and glorified. All things must point to the Triune God.

The basis of unity is not so that we would ultimately have some friends to hang out with or a great social outlet, but that we would experience God more fully. Then through this knowing and experiencing God more fully, the world would see and believe that God has sent Jesus. BOOM! The gospel is at the heart of unity. Immediately Jesus shares the end goal of unity, that the world would believe in Jesus. Unity has not just a communal goal, but a gospel goal. If the goal of unity does not ultimately desire to make Jesus known, then it will fail right at the outset because it isn't the same unity for which Jesus prayed. The Father called Jesus to follow His will in salvation and Jesus followed that mission in dying for our sins and bringing us to the Father. We share in this mission of making Jesus known and that God has sent Him.

Next, Jesus prays for something amazing and--I think in many ways--something that we can't quite grasp. The glory that the Father has given to Jesus, Jesus has given to us so that we would be one. Now I don't believe this is the glory given to Jesus after His resurrection. Jesus prays to receive His original glory in John 17:5. So the glory Jesus prays for in John 17:22 is not Jesus post resurrection and ascension glory. I believe Jesus is referencing the glory He had during His earthly ministry, which was of lowly service. Jesus' glory on earth was to serve those for which He came to die. We have that same glory of lowly service, ultimately in showing people who Jesus is, through humble word and deed, so that they will believe. The mission of people knowing who Jesus is; that is intricately attached to our unity. Unity gets sidetracked if we forget that our service is lowly and not for our own acclaim and status.

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<sup>2</sup> Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

I think woven through all of Jesus' prayer for unity are some key realities that I believe are fleshed out in different areas of the New Testament. We will only touch on a few. But the starting point I think we need to see is that unity amongst believers does not originate with them. The unity we have comes from God. The world is divided, believers are to be cohesive. As I said earlier, unity is not innate to the human heart or condition. Unity comes from God and it is in believers because Christ indwells us through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit indwells believers. The Holy Spirit is not a force or tool that one uses to accomplish tasks for the Lord. The Holy Spirit is a living Being inside every believer with creative and ministering power. The Holy Spirit brings Christ to the believer's heart and the Father is in Christ.

Unity is not something created or conjured up by believers or the church. Unity is to be strived for and guarded as it is already present through the indwelling of Christ through His Spirit. The closer we are to Christ, the more unity we will see. When our focus is Christ, then unity will come. This is, I believe, the root of unity that Paul brings in ***Ephesians 4:1*** *I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called,*<sup>2</sup> *with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,*<sup>3</sup> *eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*<sup>4</sup> *There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call--*<sup>5</sup> *one Lord, one faith, one baptism,*<sup>6</sup> *one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

Yes, we are to be eager to maintain, not create, unity and that is rooted in the Triune God. Paul then goes further and connects unity of faith and the knowledge of Jesus, ***Ephesians 4:13***<sup>13</sup> *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.*

The reality is that we can get off course because we are at war in ourselves. While we are saints, we also battle the old man and can quickly set up other things we may think or feel we should have to unify us. I don't think this is out of a negative motive, but out of good intentions. We want to be unified in relationship, fellowship, theology and organization, but we often put those before rooting our unity in Jesus, when the reality is that none of those areas will be adequately unified until there is a strong and eager desire for unity under Christ. D.A Carson states wisely that such unity is achieved not by finding "the lowest common theological denominator, but by common adherence to the apostolic gospel, by love that is joyfully self-sacrificing, by undaunted commitment to the shared goals of the mission."<sup>3</sup> That mission is Christ.

The unity in Jesus' prayer, and I believe the New Testament, is not conformity. Conformity is an approach to the church that would make everyone alike (identical patterns of look and behavior among its members, cultish). There should be diversity among Christians-- diversity of personality, interest, lifestyle, and even methods of Christian work and evangelism. It is when we elevate one of those things, rather than Christ, as the source of unity that we begin to see divisions arise. Unity is not uniformity.

We can see that diversity is a good thing for unity in the fact that the body imagery with different working parts is such a big deal in Paul's writing. 1 Corinthians 12 makes it clear that within the diversity of the church there is unity because of the Spirit living in each of us and gives us work to do in service of one another and in making Christ known. But again, it is rooted in the reality that God is in us through the Spirit. It does not come naturally, it is supernatural.

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<sup>3</sup> Carson, D.A. *The Gospel according to John*. Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991, pg 568.

Now I am not going to go into it deeply, but there are times when division is necessary. However, the reasons are few and revolve around unrepentant sin and major, destructive theological error. Paul does say to separate from those who refuse to repent and to protect the flock from wolves and false teachers. But even in those ventures it is because those things draw away from being united under Christ.

Jesus also isn't talking about organizational unity. The early church had vitality and growth but little organizational unity. As the church grew in favor under Constantine, there was one umbrella of faith in Europe: organizational unity. Nevertheless, there was not a unity of faith that drew people to Jesus. We can't have organizational unity and ignore Jesus being our center and call it good. Unity is grounded in Jesus.

Since unity is not natural and based in anything within us, then we are faced with some hard truths that we must wrestle with. First, we don't get to choose with whom we are united. Because unity is based in God, He chooses with whom we are united. The relationships we have within the body of Christ are not of our own will and accord. The relationship exists apart from us, and we must be brotherly, whether we want to be or not.

Second, division can come about because not everyone who says they are a Christian is, in fact, a Christian. The reality of false converts is something with which the evangelical church must wrestle. When we are quick to have people come forward during an emotional altar call or raise their hand after twenty repeats of a chorus until someone caves, we must remember that not all confessions are genuine...even if someone is a long time member of the church. In fact, Paul says that divisions come at times to expose who is of the sheepfold and those who are not. **1 Corinthians 11:18-19** <sup>19</sup> *for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.* I would say how we respond to disunity shows who are genuine. If we dig in our heels and refuse to fight for unity in Christ, then we may not be genuine. If we are just fighting for whatever emphasis or cause we think is important, we must check our hearts. This is a reality brought to attention in Jude as well; **Jude 1:17-21** <sup>17</sup> *But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ.* <sup>18</sup> *They said to you, "In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions."* <sup>19</sup> *It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit.* <sup>20</sup> *But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit,* <sup>21</sup> *keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.* When we find ourselves saying "I can't believe Christians act this way", we must remember that there are tares among the wheat, but also that we all battle the old man that has remnants remaining in our hearts.

Which brings me to my final point of application or challenge: We cannot come to the issue of unity and look around at how poorly everyone else is doing at maintaining or guarding unity. This is the point in my sermons where I tell my church family to stop thanking God that "so and so" is here to hear this. We must take a hard look at our own hearts and take personal responsibility for where we stand with Jesus and our desire for unity in Him. We each must look at our own heart and contribution to unity or disunity. The flood of unity will come when we each take responsibility for our own heart and stop looking at how we believe each other should be responding or contributing.

I think often unity is disrupted because of ego and pride. "How dare I not be included or consulted." "Don't they know how long I have been at this?" "How dare they speak to me that way." "I can't believe they did that." The common problem with those statements is that they are

not focused on anything else but oneself. Imagine if that is what Jesus' conversations were like with each disciple who abandoned Him.

Unity is maintained by a laser-like focus not on our agendas, strategies, feelings, desires or contributions, but on Christ. He is the ground of our unity. All other unities should flow out of this grounded-in-Christ unity. If we try and bring unity before being united in Christ then we will forever be frustrated in desire for Unity. Jesus said, "apart from me you can do nothing." This includes being united. So, let's pray that we would have such a deep union with Christ through the Spirit as we are drawn to the Father that unity is eagerly maintained and not strategically created.