

We Are ONE in the Spirit



WE ARE ONE IN THE SPIRIT

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Last Sunday, Pastor Veronica referred to a video of a Backstreet Boys concert, when all the audience were singing the lyrics together (like so many concerts I've attended in the past). She raised the question: Can we really unify people with a song? And she answered: Only temporarily—in the world, and even in the church. Singing together, dancing together, eating together—can stir feelings of unity, but the sentiment lasts not much longer than the song or the dance or the meal.

We may try to do the same thing in the church, when we sing from the same hymnbook or the same screens... When we dress in similar styles or wear uniforms... When we speak with the same token phrases... When we eschew the same behaviors... But that lasts only so long and goes only so deep. And the world is correct to call us out for that as hypocrites.

In 1970, I had the unexpected privilege to visit Dachau, the German concentration camp, established during the development of Hitler's Germany, just 80 years ago. The museum displayed photographs of men, women, and children, who had been stripped of their individuality, their identity, and made to look alike, dress alike, work alike, eat alike, and sleep alike. Yet they were not united, but dehumanized—turned into a mindless herd, subject to unspeakable degradation and abuse.

Years ago, I learned a Christian song written by Peter Scholtes, called They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love. The lyrics are as follows:

We are one in the Spirit, We are one in the Lord
We are one in the Spirit, We are one in the Lord
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored

*And they'll know we are Christians by our love,
Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love*

We will walk with each other, We will walk hand in hand
We will walk with each other, We will walk hand in hand
And together we'll spread the news that God is in our land

We will work with each other, We will work side by side
We will work with each other, We will work side by side
And we'll guard each man's dignity and save each man's pride

All praise to the Father from whom all things come
And all praise to Christ Jesus, His only Son
And all praise to the Spirit, who makes us one

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Babel

Bible historians and scholars generally agree that the origin of ancient Babylon derived from the city of Babel, a place known in its time for the massive effort of a populace united by “*a common language and a common vocabulary*” (Genesis 11:1), to build a city with a skyscraper “*with its top in the heavens*” (Genesis 11:4)—an effort that was scuttled by God Himself when He took away their ability to understand one another's words. Their work stopped, and they began to divide and move away from each other, forming distinct tribes and nations.

The climax of this account is a parody on the pride of Babylon. In the Babylonian literature the name *bab-ili* meant “the gate of God,” but in Hebrew it sounded like the word for “confusion,” and so retained that connotation among the Jews, and, though they are not etymologically linked, elicits thoughts of the English word “babble,” which means incoherent chattering.

In the 21st century, when the English language has become the global language of commerce and politics, we know all too well that common language alone cannot unite a people. In fact, speaking the same language, singing the same songs, or dressing in uniform only produces a semblance of unity.

In a reversal of the tragedy of Babel, God said through Ezekiel (11:17-20):

¹⁷ I, the Sovereign Lord, will gather you back from the nations where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel once again.'

¹⁸ “When the people return to their homeland, they will remove every trace of their vile images and detestable idols. ¹⁹ And I will give them singleness (or, unity) of heart and put a new spirit within them. I will take away their stony, stubborn heart and give them a tender, responsive heart, ²⁰ so they will obey my decrees and regulations. Then they will truly be my people, and I will be their God.

Christian Unity

Jesus echoed that plan in His prayer for His disciples (John 17:11-23):

¹¹ Now I am departing from the world; they are staying in this world, but I am coming to You. Holy Father, You have given Me Your name; now protect them by the power of Your name so that they will be united just as We are.

²⁰ "I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in Me through their message. ²¹ I pray that they will all be one, just as You and I are one—as You are in Me, Father, and I am in You. And may they be in Us so that the world will believe You sent Me.

²² "I have given them the glory You gave Me, so they may be one as We are one. ²³ I am in them and You are in Me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that You sent Me and that You love them as much as You love Me.

Christian unity is not a sentiment. It's not a hope or a wish—it's a reality! It cannot be worked up or worked out. It is not achieved by trying harder. While it has many wonderful expressions, they are not its building blocks.

Paul admonished us to practice or live out what Christ had so painfully bought for us (Romans 15:-6):

^{15:1} But we who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not just please ourselves. ^{15:2} Let each of us please his neighbor for his good to build him up. ^{15:3} For even Christ did not please Himself... ^{15:5} Now may the God of endurance and comfort give you unity with one another in accordance with Christ Jesus, ^{15:6} so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Christian unity is not *created* by singing or fellowshiping or serving together (though it may be expressed in those ways), but it is created by a powerful act of God the Holy Spirit in our lives, in accordance with what Jesus Christ has done for us.

It is the task of the Church to recognize what Christ has created within us, and to support, develop, and maintain it, by humility, by honesty, and by honor, as Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus (4:1-6):

¹ Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. ² Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. ³ Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. ⁴ For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. ⁵ There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all.

To that end, Christ has also provided gifted helpers for us (Ephesians 4:11-13):

¹¹ *Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. ¹² Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. ¹³ This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.*

Christian unity is a fact, even when you can't see it, or don't feel it. We think we need it, because we don't believe we have it.

It is the product, not of human effort or will, but of divine power—it is part of the package of our salvation in Christ. We keep asking God for it, when we should be thanking God that it was His idea in the first place, and that He has secured it for us through Jesus Christ!

Its blessed effects are extolled in Psalm 133:

¹ *Behold, how good and how pleasant it is
For brothers to dwell together in unity!*

² *It is like the precious oil upon the head,
Coming down upon the beard,
Even Aaron's beard,*

Coming down upon the edge of his robes.

³ *It is like the dew of Hermon*

*Coming down upon the mountains of Zion;
For there the Lord commanded the blessing—life forever.*

Christian unity is neither male nor female, rich or poor, literate or illiterate, American or other, Democrat or Republican, vegan or omnivore, healthy or sick, fat or slender, able or disabled, black, brown, red, yellow, or white. There is no external description that delineates the believer from the lost. You cannot tell by what you see.

We set our eyes on what we can see, and conclude that we are NOT united. But this is patent unbelief. Christ has done it! He has broken down the walls of hostility that have kept us apart. We need to begin living like it is so, like we are one family, one body, one new humanity.

Our differences are many, but they do not have to divide us. As Paul wrote (1 Corinthians 12:12): *"The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ."* Our diversity is, in fact, what makes us wonderfully useful in the hands of our Creator, when it is anchored in the Spirit of unity.

Consider 1 Corinthians 12:13-27.

¹³ *Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit.*

¹⁴ Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. ¹⁵ If the foot says, "I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand," that does not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear says, "I am not part of the body because I am not an eye," would that make it any less a part of the body? ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, how would you hear? Or if your whole body were an ear, how would you smell anything? (You cannot say, I am not needed.)

¹⁸ But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it. ¹⁹ How strange a body would be if it had only one part! ²⁰ Yes, there are many parts, but only one body.

²¹ The eye can never say to the hand, "I don't need you." The head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you." (No one else can say, You're not needed.)

²² In fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary. ²³ And the parts we regard as less honorable are those we clothe with the greatest care. So we carefully protect those parts that should not be seen, ²⁴ while the more honorable parts do not require this special care. So God has put the body together such that extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity. ²⁵ This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other. ²⁶ If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad.

²⁷ All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it.

No Throwaways

We live in a throwaway culture. Pastor Richard Dresselhaus recently wrote this brief devotional:

Throwaways. And when that is people...the offense is grievous.

This is especially true in the church. "...those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable..."

But sadly...sometimes they are treated like throwaways – dispensable – nuisances -- in the way.

These are the people without power. If they plead their cause -- no one listens...or sometimes even cares.

The test of practical and authentic godliness is this -- to evaluate how the people without power are treated.

Paul's teaching is that they are the ones deserving of special consideration. It's the weak...less honorable...unpresentable – these are worthy of special honor...special modesty...special affection.

This is the rule for the body of Christ. There are no throwaways.

So, how can we maintain and advance this wonderful unity of spirit that Christ has given us? Here's how we may do it (Colossians 3:12-15):

Therefore, God's chosen ones, holy and loved, put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, accepting one another and forgiving one another if anyone has a complaint against another. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. Above

all, put on love—the perfect bond of unity. And let the peace of the Messiah, to which you were also called in one body, control your hearts.

- Compassion
- Kindness
- Humility
- Gentleness
- Patience
- Acceptance
- Forgiveness
- And, above all, LOVE—the perfect bond of unity.

How shall we know if we are doing it right? If the peace of the Messiah controls your heart.

Is your response, your reaction, your answer—the way you treat another believer—an expression of your peace in Christ?

Does your response, your reaction, your answer—the way you treat another believer—bring you peace in Christ?

Will your response, your reaction, your answer—the way you treat another believer—establish the peace of Christ between you?

Above all, put on love—the perfect bond of unity. And let the peace of the Messiah... control your hearts.

Do this, ABOVE ALL.