

## The Strategy of Unity: A Ministry Partnership

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1 CORINTHIANS 1:4-9 (NLT) *I always thank my God for you and for the gracious gifts he has given you, now that you belong to Christ Jesus. <sup>5</sup>Through him, God has enriched your church in every way—with all of your eloquent words and all of your knowledge. <sup>6</sup>This confirms that what I told you about Christ is true. <sup>7</sup>Now you have every spiritual gift you need as you eagerly wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>8</sup>He will keep you strong to the end so that you will be free from all blame*

*on the day when our Lord Jesus Christ returns. <sup>9</sup>God will do this, for he is faithful to do what he says, and he has invited you into partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

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HEBREWS 3:14-15 (NRSV) *For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end. <sup>15</sup>As it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."*

This year's election campaign was brutal, regardless of which party one supports. It also gives us a "case-in-point" to apply the "Seven Principles of Biblical Unity". So far, we've examined four of those principles:

**Principle 1: The Priority of Unity ~ It is the Secret of God's Will** ~ EPHESIANS 1:9-10 (NRSV) Regardless of who is right or who is wrong; or who is *perceived* to be right or wrong—in the political race, in the family, in the church or in any other relationship—no issue is more important than the unity of Christ's body! Jesus said, "*No city or house divided against itself will stand*" (MATTHEW 12:25 NRSV).

**Principle 2: The Tools of Unity: Words that Build Up and Give Grace** ~ EPHESIANS 4:29 (NRSV) Regardless of who is right or wrong, or who is *perceived* to be right or wrong, our words with one another must be—ABSOLUTELY MUST BE—chosen to build up, rather than tear down, and to give grace, rather than to win an argument or to prove "I'm right!" Win/lose solutions *always* divide; never build up. Remember the first principle: nothing is more important than the unity of Christ's body.

**Principle 3: The Foundation of Unity: Love** ~ I CORINTHIANS 13:4-7 (NRSV) Surely this one is self-explanatory. Some things simply cannot be done or said in love. But, for emphasis, "*Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful or boastful or proud.*" Love speaks with a different tone of voice.

**Principle 4: The Model of Unity: The Mind of Christ** ~ PHILIPPIANS 2:3-5 (NRSV) "*...in humility regard others as better than yourselves...*" Now, there *is* a loving, edifying way to debate and resolve conflict. But if we are to have the mind of Christ—if we are to approach every issue in humility, the first consideration always must be, "What if I'm wrong?"

I understand: some people just can't comprehend that concept. You know some people like that, don't you? Almost always when I confront someone with the question, "What if you're wrong?" the response is, "But I'm not." Without the humility to consider—honestly—the possibility that he or she may be wrong, no person can participate effectively in the satisfactory resolution of any conflict; and therefore, cannot participate effectively in the kingdom of God.

And so, today we come to:

**Principle 5: The Strategy of Unity: A Ministry Partnership** I CORINTHIANS 1:8-9 (NLT) (*God*) *will keep you strong to the end, ...for he is faithful to do what he says, and he has invited you into partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Now, I'm walking a thin line, using the New Living Translation; because it is one of only five English versions that render that verse, "...*he has invited you into partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*" In the original language the word is *κοινωνια*, which usually is translated, "fellowship;" and, most English versions (42, in fact) say, "...*he has invited you into fellowship with his Son...*"

The word literally means, "common"—as in common property, or common work. It is the basis of English words, like "community" and "communion." The Amplified New Testament uses two words: "companionship and participation;" while the Easy to Read Version says, "(God) has chosen you to share life with His Son..."

I think the word, "partnership", captures all of the above.

The other word that grabs my attention is "invited"; "...*he has invited you into partnership...* In the original language. It is the same word used in...

- Galatians 5:13: "...you were called into liberty..."
- Ephesians 4:1: "I ... urge you to live a life worthy of your calling."
- Colossians 3:15: "And may the peace of Christ reign in your hearts, because it is for this that you were called together as parts of one body."

And in its noun form, "*εκκλησια*," meaning "those who are called," it most often is translated, "church." It is totally within Scriptural integrity to say that we have been called into partnership with Christ, and that that constitutes a valid definition of "church."

Again, like humility from last week, this is a "hard sell" in a consumer culture whose mantra is "the customer is always right." The world defines "membership" as "paying your dues and getting your benefits." The New Testament defines membership in the Church as "being called into partnership with Christ." The world talks about "having" a church; the New Testament talks about "being" the church.

From the greatest figures in the history of Israel and the church, to the most anonymous person on the back pew of some tiny congregation in the remotest part of Appalachia, all God's servants have their roles defined by God's calling.

God's call to each person is unique. Some are dramatic: Peter Marshall, Saul of Tarsus, convicted Watergate felon, Chuck Colson. Sometimes we get so distracted by the wide-screen, Technicolor, surround sound stories of God's call that we completely miss the "still small voice" God uses to call most of us.

The prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah, and St. Paul (among others) say God

called them "from their mothers' wombs." In a sense God's call is imbedded in our DNA—not so much an "event" as it is part of our identity as beings created in the image of God. It's a kind of "Calling by Self-Discovery"; and some of us just kinda' "grow into it" by paying attention to the things we love to do, the things that bring us a sense of fulfillment and the things that other people affirm in us.

But, some of us are less self-aware, so it takes something a bit more theatrical to get our attention. If you're like me, it may take a 2X4 upside the head; and some folks go through life blissfully oblivious altogether to their calling. But all of us are called. Every life has divine meaning and purpose, and those who discover it rarely demonstrate symptoms of depression or aimlessness or emptiness.

So, the ways God calls his servants varies, but the call is never to a merely private faith or piety: we're not alone. Isaiah's call was not simply to restore Israel, but to extend God's salvation to the "all peoples of the earth." In the opening lines of the Corinthian letter, when Paul says "you are called," the "you" is plural—"y'all are called!" It's not enough for us to cherish only a private faith. Oh, there is a private dimension to our faith and our calling; but our fellowship with one another and our witness to the world, if faithful, will reflect the partnership with Christ into which God has called us collectively.

Partnership. Here's the IRS definition: "*the relationship existing between two or more persons who join to carry on a trade or business. Each person contributes money, property, labor or skill, and expects to share in the profits and losses of the business.*"

Wikipedia defines it as "*an arrangement in which parties agree to cooperate to advance their mutual interests.*"

But I find no better definition of the partnership into which we are called than this beautiful summation in **EPHESIANS 4:15-16**: "*...speaking the truth in love, we will grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, <sup>16</sup>from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.*"

Let's consider one more New Testament image of partnership: the church is the bride of Christ. The traditional marriage vow is a promise is to love and to cherish... "in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, for better or for worse." Remaining faithful only as long as we agree with each other does not fit any definition of partnership—or unity. The good news is that our partnership is not dependent upon any of us being right, nor upon any of us being in agreement on any specific issue. "*God will keep us strong to the end, for he is faithful to do what he says, and he has called us into partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*"