

The Blessedness of Unity

PSALM 133:1 How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

*² It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.*

*³ It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore.*

A young rabbi moved into his new congregation. During the Friday service half the congregation stood for the prayers and half remained seated, and each side shouted at the other, insisting that theirs was the true tradition.

Nothing the rabbi said or did moved toward solving the impasse. Finally, in desperation, the young rabbi sought out the synagogue's 90 year-old founder. He met the old rabbi in a nursing home and poured out his troubles. "So tell me, was it the tradition for the congregation to stand during prayers?"

"No," answered the old rabbi.

"Ah, then it was the tradition to sit during the prayers?"

"No," answered the old rabbi.

"Well, what we have is complete chaos! Half the people stand and shout, and the other half sit and scream."

"Ah," said the old man, "that was the tradition."

Whenever two or more are gathered together, people will come down on different sides. There will be differences. Dissent. Conflict. It's been that way since the beginning of the church. It was that way in the very gifted and charismatic church at Corinth, and it was that way in the church in Philippi (which was Paul's favorite, I think).

Unfortunately, churches all around the world experience brokenness. Christians are divided over things as petty as the style and time of worship services. I've been saying that unity is crucial, because it is the Secret of God's Will. Nothing is more important to God than the unity of Christ's Body. Unity also is crucial to any organization for the achieving its purpose.

But how is it possible to live in unity when disagreement seems to be the norm? Our founders, Thomas and Alexander Campbell, were fond of quoting St. Augustine: "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things love."

But, can we agree on what is essential and what is non-essential? In a perfect world, we'd sit down together to prayerfully and lovingly collaborate to discern God's will in a given situation. The way is not always clear. Sometimes we just have to reach consensus and walk by faith—test whether it edifies or tears down.

But, this isn't a perfect world; nor are we perfect creatures. As long as there's freedom of thought, there'll be differences of opinion; and as long as we

humans are incomplete (which the definition of one biblical word for sin), we'll not always be able to discern the difference between our "opinion" and the "truth."

The fundamental core of our Christian beliefs (i.e., our "Bedrock Beliefs") are not negotiable. But if the dispute is over a nonessential issue—even certain interpretations of doctrine, (i.e., free will vs. predestination)—some prayerful discussion in love is acceptable, but believers should never let it cause division.

Several years ago, Jo Lynn and I were part of a leadership team in a Christian Marriage Enrichment program. When we dealt with conflict, we had a beginning point: "The issue is not the issue." That's the case in almost all human conflict.

The issue rarely is about what starts the disagreement. The issue almost always is about one of two human obsessions: (1) the need for control, or (2) the need to be right. Actually, it could be argued that the two are one and the same.

In conflict resolution, integrity demands that we acknowledge our limits and re-evaluate an issue. "What if I'm wrong?" Sometimes new information is discovered. Remembering that in many cases the real issue is personal pride and control rather than the truth, it still is possible that humans actually can change a position when convincing new data is provided.

But in some cases there simply will be nothing we can do in human strength to mend our differences. If we selfishly and irrationally cling to the belief that we cannot be wrong or that our preference is better than others' opinions, conflict will be unavoidable.

Even when there's consensus it's likely that some people will be disappointed with the results; but disappointment doesn't necessarily lead to strife. Sometimes the old adage is valid: we just have to agree to disagree. But, in the church we must remember to do so agreeably—and to continue in love.

In a democratic organization in which votes are taken, there inevitably will be winners and losers. We all love democracy until "our side" is outvoted. But if we are to choose unity over division, then we all are required to be prepared occasionally to accept defeat graciously, and move on. In voluntarily accepting the will of the majority (even when we disagree) for the greater good of a unified church, we please God. And what's more, unity gives us greater joy than getting our way.

Even when Christians disagree, when we are united on the basis of our common need of God's grace—when we understand that none of us is capable of understanding God's absolute truth absolutely, then there is the possibility of unity, even when "the other side wins" on a particular issue. The psalmist wrote, "*How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!*" (Ps. 133:1)

An ancient Persian proverb says, "The dogs bark, but the caravan moves on."

It evokes images of long lines of camels led through desert villages, with little dogs yapping and nipping at their heels. The dogs are a bother, but the caravan moves on.

Sir Winston Churchill said, "You will never reach your destination if you stop and throw stones at every dog that barks."

After prayerfully giving our best effort we still can't agree, sometimes we just have to settle for understanding. Understanding always trumps agreement, although, ironically, understanding is generally the first step toward agreement. So if we can't agree, we need to seek understanding—and (maybe this is most important of all) sometimes we just need to **get over it**.

Life moves on. Girlfriends break off romantic relationships, but life moves on. Women continue to get abortions, but life moves on. Some people are going to disagree with your politics, or with your stance on the gay/lesbian issue, or with your opinions and preferences regarding worship style or schedules; but life moves on. Hijackers kill innocent passengers; terrorists kill innocent priests; spouses get ill and die, but life moves on. There are no easy, automatic answers; but life moves on.

I'm not suggesting a laissez faire, do-nothing approach. I believe we're called to confront what we perceive to be wrong; but we'll never agree at every point on what is wrong. What I am saying is that disagreement is not the end of the world. Disagreement need not—must not—divide us as Christians. Indeed, disagreement, when pursued openly and with integrity, can lead to the discovery of a new reality superior to either of the realities being contested.

And we move on, either on our own two feet, or being dragged along.

Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi and said, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil 2:12). Christianity is not a mathematical formula to work out our problems, nor a magical incantation by which all our dreams and wishes come true. It's not a set of buttons or keys you push to solve all life's problems. It's a difficult, demanding way of living and loving in obedience to the Will of God.

At the infamous "bottom line," there is no more effective counsel toward unity than Paul's plea to the church at Philippi: "*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others*" (Philippians 2:3-4 NRSV)

You may recall that as the Fourth New Testament Principle of Unity: The Model of Unity—Humility.

Nobody ever said it would be easy. But the rewards are out of this world.