

The Christian's Attitude Toward Unity



Discovering God's Word

Bible Study Series

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Learn why unity between Christians is important and what Christians can do to achieve it

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Study Number: DGW91

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My plea: It is my hope and prayer that you are searching for the truth that is contained in God's word, the Bible. My desire is to help you understand and obey these truths God has revealed in the pages of His word. It is to that end that I write this material. Please observe all of the Scripture references and evaluate whether the conclusions I have drawn are in harmony with God's word. If they are, I ask that you make honest application of those truths to your life and obey God's instructions.

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The Christian's Attitude Toward Unity

What is your attitude toward unity with your brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ? That is, what is your mindset toward being at peace and being one with those who have also been redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ? Do you view unity as being an important part of Christianity? Do you recognize that you have personal responsibility to pursue unity with all your brothers and sisters in Christ? Or, are you demonstrating selfishness and a lack of concern about being one with those who are in Christ?

“Unity” is the state when multiple people are in harmony with one another, acting as if they were one. It is contrary to every person pulling in different directions and refusing to work together. Therefore, unity is crucial in any area where it is important for multiple people to work together. Unity is important in order for a nation to be successful. Unity is important in order for a business to be successful. Unity is important in order for a family to be successful. And, unity is important in order for God’s people to successfully accomplish their God-given mission – especially within the context of a local church.

God’s people, as we will see throughout this lesson, are expected to all be working together as one. Not only does God instruct unity among all those who follow Him (particularly within the context of the local church), but He also condemns

divisiveness. Consider, for instance, God’s instruction concerning an individual who acts in divisive ways. “But avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless. Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned” (Titus 3:9-11). You see, rather than working with his/her brethren for a common cause, the one who is divisive will be encouraging infighting, causing trouble among his/her brethren, and working contrary to the purposes of God in Christ Jesus.

The purpose of this lesson is to encourage each one to understand the importance of unity, the essential ingredients to accomplish unity, and some common pitfalls that must be avoided. Furthermore, this study will attempt to emphasize the impact each Christian has in either accomplishing or harming unity. Furthermore, please recognize that the things we will be discussing are applicable to how you conduct yourself regarding any of your Christian brothers and sisters. But, our study is particularly applicable to your conduct as part of a local church.

The Importance Of Unity

As you begin shaping your attitude toward unity into an attitude that is shaped by the teachings of God’s inspired word, you need to recognize why it is even important to possess the right attitude toward unity. Therefore, consider the following points about why unity is important.

Unity is commanded

Unity among Christians is not just presented in the Scriptures as being a good idea that is worth pursuing. Instead, it is something that is commanded by God in order for Christians to be pleasing to Him. Consider three passages in which unity among God’s people is seen as a command.

(1) 1 Corinthians 1:10-13: “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be

no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, 'I am of Paul,' or 'I am of Apollos,' or 'I am of Cephas,' or 'I am of Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"

There was a problem of division in the Corinthian congregation. Evidently, the members of that congregation were claiming to be followers of men (perhaps the men who taught and baptized them) rather than considering themselves as united in following Jesus Christ. However, Paul made it clear that Christ is not divided – and they must not be either! After all, no man was crucified for them and they could not experience salvation by being baptized in the name of any man.

So, in correcting this problem, Paul (writing by inspiration of the Holy Spirit) commanded them all to be united (verse 10). In fact, I want you to look back at the passage and consider the degree to which Paul commanded them to be united. He pleaded (by the name of the Lord Jesus Christ) that they all “speak the same thing, “that there be no divisions” among them, and that they be “perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” Now, how much division was God permitting to exist within the local church in Corinth? Could they disagree on matters of doctrine? Could they mistreat one another over points of liberty? Absolutely not!

(2) Ephesians 4:1-6: “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”

There must be an effort made to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Every member must be “endeavoring” at this. As we will

discuss a bit later in this lesson, each member ought to be pursuing unity and peace with one another. And, in order to accomplish this unity, each Christian must be trying to maintain the unity that exists in what the Spirit has revealed (in the pages of God's word).

Then, not only does this passage give each Christian the responsibility to maintain the “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” but it also identifies some of the most crucial points of unity in the Spirit's revelation. Paul says that there is only “one body” (church) that belongs to Jesus Christ – as opposed to there being many different churches God has established. There is only “one Spirit” who has only revealed one message of truth (found in the Bible) – as opposed to there being many different revelations of truth. There is only “one hope” that is produced through the gospel's call (the hope of Heaven) – as opposed to the gospel offering different hopes to different people. There is only “one Lord” who is every Christian's Master (Jesus Christ) – as opposed to God's people all following different masters. There is only “one faith” that reveals one system of acceptable religious belief, practice, and teaching found in the gospel's message – as opposed to there being many different God-approved systems of religious belief, practice, and teaching. There is only “one baptism” through which all who are Christians have been forgiven of their sins and entered into right relationships with God through Jesus Christ – as opposed to there being many different ways people have achieved the forgiveness of sins and entered the body of Christ. And, there is only “one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” – as opposed to there being many different gods who are battling for supremacy.

All of this is evidence that there is unity in God's revelation. That means, those who are Christians do not have to try to manufacture unity where there is none. Instead, God's people simply have to endeavor to maintain the unity that already exists in God's revelation and plan!

(3) Philippians 1:27: “Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.”

Though it is not the only thing involved, unity is essential to a Christian conducting himself/herself “worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Notice that Paul instructed the Philippian Christians to be walking together in unity. Particularly, notice the degree to which these Christians were instructed to be united. They were to be firmly committed to being “one” in spirit and with “one mind” they were to be “striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (*English Standard Version*).

In this instruction, the true concept of unity is on display. The entire congregation of Christians in Philippi were to be diligently working to be “one” for the faith of the gospel. It was not acceptable for them to be pulling in opposite directions. Nor was it acceptable for them to be united for anything besides the faith of the gospel. Their unity had to be based in the faith that God revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ (as now recorded in the New Testament).

Pictures of unity

As you consider the importance of unity, not only do the Scriptures present direct instructions concerning its essential nature which must be obeyed, but the Scriptures also present wonderful pictures of unity. These pictures ought to encourage every Christian to do his/her part to pursue unity. So, as we consider these pictures, you should be encouraged to view unity in the way God views it.

(1) In Psalm 133. This psalm reads, “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is For brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, Running down on the beard, The beard of Aaron, Running down on the edge of his garments. It is like the dew of Hermon, Descending upon the mountains of Zion; For there the Lord commanded the blessing—Life forevermore.”

First, let’s focus on verse 1. The psalmist identifies how God views unity. It is “good” and “pleasant.” The implication is that a failure for brethren to dwell together in unity is not good or pleasant in the sight of God. Therefore, even in this passage that predates the Christian age and the church, God wanted those who were brethren to be at peace and work in unison with one another.

Then, this truth is amplified by verses 2 and 3. Though these pictures are somewhat lost to the mind of the modern reader, they emphasize things that are good and pleasant. The anointing of Aaron (the high priest) with oil emphasizes the approval that God had given for him. And, he was not just anointed with oil, but the oil was running down his beard and onto his garments. God’s great approval of His high priest is conveyed to demonstrate His approval for brethren who are dwelling together in unity.

Finally, the dews of Hermon reference an area that was very well watered (Mount Hermon was the highest peak of Israel’s northern mountain region). The picture, however, is how refreshing the dews/rains that fall on Mount Hermon would be to the mountains of Jerusalem (a dryer area of Israel). Therefore, brethren who dwell together in unity is refreshing in the sight of God!

(2) In the early church. Although the early (first century) churches were not without their share of difficulties in the area of unity (i.e. see Acts 6, the church in Corinth, etc.), there are some tremendous pictures of unity in the early church. Take a moment to specifically consider the pictures presented in Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-37.

First, Acts 2:42-47 gives us a glimpse into the church of Christ right after it was established. In it, the early Christians are pictured as continuing “steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (verse 42). Then, it states that “all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need” (verses 44-45). Therefore, these early Christians were so committed to pursuing unity in Christ Jesus that they were willing to sell their own possessions in order to help their brothers and sisters who were in need. Finally, the passage teaches that they were “continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (verses 46-47). Every day, these Christians were committed to working together to serve the Lord and were of “one accord.” As I

understand it, the image of this Greek term (translated “one accord”) is comparable to a number of musical notes that (even though they are different) work together in perfect harmony. This is the picture given to us of the church in its infancy.

Second, Acts 4:32-37 presents a picture similar to the one in Acts 2. The passage says that those who believed “were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common” (verse 32). This great example of harmony in the early church even extended to the fact that those who possessed lands or houses were willing to sell those possessions in order to help their brothers and sisters who were lacking. They were truly working together as one man.

(3) In the phrase “same mind.” There are a number of occasions in which the instruction for Christians to be of the “same mind” (or a similar expression) is given in the Scriptures. In Paul’s concluding remarks to the Roman Christians, he desired for them to be “like-minded toward one another” and be glorifying the Father and Jesus Christ with “one mind and one mouth” (Romans 15:5-6). We have already seen that Paul commanded the Corinthian Christians to all be “perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Corinthians 1:10). In his final instructions to the Corinthian Christians in 2 Corinthians, Paul told them to “be of one mind, live in peace” (2 Corinthians 13:11). Paul told the Philippians to be “like-minded,” to be “of one accord,” and to be “of one mind” in Philippians 2:2. In Philippians 3:16, Paul said Christians should walk “by the same rule” and “be of the same mind.” In Philippians 4:2-3, Paul pleaded for two Christian women to “be of the same mind in the Lord” and for their brethren to help them. Then, in 1 Peter 3:8, the apostle Peter instructed Christians to be “of one mind.”

All of these passages picture unity in the sense of multiple people having only one mind (sharing the same mind). This, of course, should be the mind of Christ – as revealed in the pages of God’s word (see 1 Corinthians 2:6-16). Christians, therefore, must not be focused on pursuing their own individual desires and goals. Instead, they must be committed to maintaining the unity that is revealed

in the pages of God’s word and living in peace with one another.

Why unity is important

Having considered that unity is commanded and the way unity is pictured in the pages of the Holy Scriptures, take some time to consider *why* unity is as important as we have already seen. Consider the following passages to help you develop the proper attitude toward the importance of unity.

(1) As seen in Luke 11:17. In context, Jesus had cast out a demon. When the people became aware of this, some said, “He casts out demons by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons” (verse 15), while others thought this was “a sign from heaven” (verse 16). Then, Jesus (knowing their thoughts) said, “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and a house divided against a house falls” (verse 17). In this, Jesus demonstrates that He could not have cast out demons in the name of Beelzebub (Satan) because then Satan would be divided against himself. Then, in giving this explanation for His miracle, Jesus identifies the principle that whatever is divided against itself will fall/experience destruction. Certainly, the same is true concerning Christians who are divided against one another. They will not be successful in their work. Then, this is particularly applicable for the local church that is divided against itself.

(2) As seen in Amos 3:3. This passage records a very simple question that has tremendous application for our study: “Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?” I want you to picture a three-legged race (where two people each have one of their legs tied to the other – then they must work together to accomplish a specific goal). As long as these individuals are working together, are focused on the other, and are headed in the same direction, they will be successful. However, whenever one of the participants attempts to go in a different direction or refuses to work with his/her partner, they will not succeed. In the same way, Christians who are pulling in different ways or refusing to work with their brethren will not be successful to achieve the ultimate prize of Heaven – and the work of the local church will be hindered.

(3) As seen in John 17:20-23. In John 17, Jesus can be seen praying to His Heavenly Father shortly before His earthly life would end. Certainly, Jesus would be praying about the things that would have been of utmost importance to Him at this time. Particularly, in verses 20-23, consider Jesus' prayer for unity among those who would follow Him. "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me."

Notice that Jesus was praying for every Christian who is living today. After all, those who are Christians have believed in Jesus through the word of His disciples (i.e. those who wrote the words we have in the pages of the Bible). Then, notice that Jesus wants you to be "one" with your Christian brothers and sisters – just as He and the Father are one. This is a perfect degree of unity! In fact, Jesus said, "that they may be made perfect in one." Finally, observe the reason *why* this unity among those who would profess to follow Him is so important. Jesus said that this was important so "that the world may believe" that the Father had sent Him (see verse 21 and 23). Jesus certainly recognized that divisions among those who profess to follow Him would not lead other people to follow Him. Instead, this division would hinder people from finding and following the way of truth. Therefore, Paul instructed Christians to glorify the Father and Jesus "with one mind and one mouth" (Romans 15:5-6).

(4) As seen in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. In this passage, the church is compared to a body. Now, it is clear that the body does not consist of just one member – but many members. Yet, there is still only one body. This is also true about Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the Head of the body (Colossians 1:18), and the body of Christ (church) consists of many individual members (Christians). Then, through this text, Paul demonstrates that each individual member is necessary for the entire body to function at its

maximum ability. Just imagine if the whole body were an eye. Where would the ability to hear come from? Or, if the whole body only fulfilled the function of hearing, where would the sense of smell come from?

In the same way, the body of Jesus Christ is composed of many different Christians who each have different abilities and opportunities. And, each one is to utilize his/her own abilities and opportunities to accomplish the purposes of God. No one Christian is insignificant to accomplish this task. Therefore, unity is crucial. Just like the physical body must not fight against itself (which would certainly lead to a deterioration of its health), the body of Christ must have no "schism in the body" (no division in the body, verse 25)! Rather than being divided, all the members of the body of Christ "should have the same care for one another" (verse 25, see also Romans 12:4-5).

Essential Elements For Unity

Unity is crucial among those who are God's people. We have seen this very plainly in the points we have considered thus far in our study. Now, we must proceed to focus on some elements that are essential to have the kind of true unity God desires. But, before you consider these three essential elements, understand that God does not approve of just any kind of unity. Instead, there is a kind of true unity that is approved in the Scriptures. This is unity in the faith of the gospel (see Philippians 1:27). Any kind of unity that does not harmonize with the teachings of the Scriptures is not approved of God!

Each one must put on love

Love is essential to having true unity – loving God and loving your Christian brothers and sisters. Consider Jesus' response whenever He was asked to identify the greatest commandment in the law. "Jesus said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the

Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40). Given the critical nature of both of these commandments, let’s consider how they will impact your ability to be united with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

First, you must love God with every fiber of your being. Now, truly loving God involves more than just saying that you love God. Truly loving God requires that you keep God’s commandments. Jesus said, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15). Furthermore, John wrote, “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3). When you love God so much that you are keeping His commandments with zeal and gladness, you will be ordering your conduct in such a way that you will contribute to unity and peace rather than division!

Second, you must love your neighbor as yourself. While your “neighbor” includes anyone/everyone you come into contact with, it would also include your brothers and sisters in Christ. The apostle John makes it abundantly clear in 1 John that Christians must love one another (see 1 John 3:10-23 and 1 John 4:7-11). In fact, John even says that if someone says “I love God” and hates his brother, he is a liar (1 John 4:20-21). Now, as you consider that God requires you to love your brothers and sisters in Christ, you need to appreciate what is involved in this kind of love. 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 makes the characteristics of love abundantly clear. “Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Certainly, whenever you are showing this kind of true love toward your brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, you will be doing everything within your ability to promote unity!

Each one must abide in Bible doctrine

A second essential element for unity is that each Christian must be diligent to abide in the doctrine of Christ. As I have already mentioned, true unity cannot be accomplished without being rooted in the true teachings of Jesus Christ. In the religious

world today, there are many people who claim to be united; but they are united in something other than the gospel of Jesus Christ (often in a set of false religious teachings). The concept that people can be united while they are divided is even common today. That is, they do not make differences in doctrine to be a test of fellowship. Therefore, they claim to be united even though they do not believe, practice, or teach the same doctrine. None of this is the kind of true unity God approves.

Look carefully at what John wrote in 2 John 1:9-11. “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.”

All Christians are expected to abide in the doctrine of Jesus Christ (as revealed in the pages of the New Testament). There is no part of Christ’s doctrine that is insignificant. Also, notice carefully that those who do not bring the doctrine of Christ must be rejected from the fellowship of Christians. Paul wrote that Christians must “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness” (Ephesians 5:11). Therefore, in order for true unity to be experienced, it requires that every member of the body of Christ be of the same mind and the same judgment concerning the doctrine of Jesus Christ.

Each one must pursue that which makes for peace and edification

Differences in doctrinal beliefs are not the only things that will lead to division. Oftentimes, division occurs because of personality conflicts or differences in matters of opinion. Therefore, in order for true unity to be experienced within the body of Christ, each member must be devoted to pursuing that which makes for peace and edification.

There are matters of Christian liberty. These are areas in which God has given the Christian the freedom to choose one thing or another – and both are equally acceptable to God. For instance, one area of Christian liberty that is addressed in the New Testament is the eating of meat (see Romans 14).

Under the Law of Moses, the Israelites were restricted as to what meats they were permitted to eat. However, under the law of Christ, those restrictions were removed. You can imagine the difficulty that arose whenever there were Jewish people who had become Christians (who were opposed to eating the meat that had been restricted) and Gentile people who had become Christians (who were not opposed to eating those meats). Yet, throughout Romans 14, Paul deals with this kind of conflict by reminding them that this is a matter of Christian liberty. God had not commanded the meat to be eaten – and He had not forbidden it. It was left up to personal choice.

Though Paul makes a number of significant points in Romans 14 about areas of Christian liberties, consider what he says in verse 19. “Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another.” Each Christian must be aware of his/her brothers and sisters when dealing with matters of Christian liberty. It is possible to cause a brother/sister to sin by causing him/her to violate his/her own conscience. Therefore, each Christian must make decisions in matters of liberty that will promote peace and will build up others in the faith, rather than make decisions that will promote division and cause his/her brethren to stumble!

Personal Responsibility Toward Unity

As you consider these three essential elements for unity, one thing should be abundantly clear: There is personal responsibility toward unity! Unity is not the product of someone saying that there should be unity. Unity is the result of diligent work by each individual Christian to apply the teachings of God’s word and act in ways that will promote true unity.

Unity doesn’t just happen

Unity is the product of hard work. It is not an accidental occurrence. This is true in any area (i.e. unity in a nation, in a business, in a family, or in the

church). Every step of the way, unity takes work. It takes work to form *and* it takes work to maintain.

Think about it for a moment. If unity was just a natural occurrence, there would be no need for God to command unity among His followers or provide instructions concerning how Christians can achieve unity. However, unity involves great dedication by everyone involved to accomplishing the task.

Furthermore, while unity takes time to form and maintain, it can be destroyed in an instant! You might think about unity as a house that has resulted from great diligence and work to construct. The process of building this house takes a significant amount of time. Then, there are years of care and maintenance that go into keeping the house in good condition. However, you might think of division as a wrecking ball that has the potential to tear through the structure in an instant. What was once a beautiful and fully-functional house is left in ruins. This is often the case with division. Years of unity are destroyed quickly by someone who fails to do his/her part in contributing to unity.

One element, then, to maintaining unity is for Christians to be diligent in identifying those who are divisive – and then taking the appropriate actions concerning them. Consider Titus 3:9-11 again. “But avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless. Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.”

Unity is the work of every member

Remember (from 1 Corinthians 12:12-27) that the body of Christ is made up of many members (individual Christians). Therefore, as you consider what your attitude should be toward unity, you should realize that it takes the effort of everyone involved to enjoy! No one is insignificant to the work of being united. Thus, you play an important role in unity. You will either help God’s people be united or divided.

Unity is not just the work of elders, deacons, and preachers. Unity is the work of every member – at least if the unity is going to be real and lasting. You see, unity is not dictated or forced upon people. Unity

is accomplished through the deliberate and careful work of all members. Go back and consider the verses we studied in the first section of the lesson and view each passage from the standpoint of personal responsibility. For instance, consider that Ephesians 4:3 instructs you to endeavor “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Unity is *your* work!

Common Pitfalls To Avoid

Finally, there are some common pitfalls that work to destroy unity. While there is much that could be said about each one, let’s briefly discuss them. And, as we consider these, please understand that these are *not* the only pitfalls to be aware of!

Failure to accurately interpret God’s word

You must recall that being united in God’s word is essential to possessing true unity. Therefore, any time someone fails to accurately interpret God’s word, it contributes to division. God’s people must not embrace or unite around any false doctrines (2 John 1:9-11). For instance, 2 Peter 3:15-16 warns about those who would “twist” the Scriptures to their own destruction. Today, there are many ways the Scriptures have been twisted that have led people to spiritual destruction rather than salvation.

In order to avoid this pitfall that contributes to division, you must determine to be diligent regarding your study of God’s word. 2 Timothy 2:15 says, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” You should imitate the noble examples of the people in Berea, who “searched the Scriptures daily” to find out whether they were being taught the truth or not. Be a truth-seeker and do not settle for anything other than the complete truth (as revealed in the pages of the Bible).

Improperly handling opinions

Everyone on this earth has opinions – on many different subjects. Of course, as I have briefly discussed already, there are some areas in which we are permitted to hold different opinions (i.e. in areas

of liberty). There are areas in which God has not required or forbidden a thing. These are matters of personal judgment and conscience. Yet, many divisions have occurred in these areas of personal opinions – when one Christian binds his/her own opinion on another or disregards the feelings/consciences of others.

In order to avoid this pitfall, you must train yourself to view your own opinions in matters of liberty properly. For instance, Romans 14 teaches that it is sinful for you to force your own opinion on your brothers and sisters in matters of liberty. Furthermore, it is sinful for you to disregard their consciences and opinions in these areas. Instead, what God wants from you is to pursue peace and mutual edification (as we saw in Romans 14:19). You must heed the instruction in Romans 12:16 toward the way you view your own opinions. “Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.”

Improperly handling traditions

There are different kinds of traditions. There are traditions that are given by God. There are man-made traditions that violate the Scriptures. And, there are man-made traditions that fall into the realm of Christian liberty. In every area of tradition, you must evaluate what kind of tradition it is. If it is from God, you are obligated to keep it. If it contradicts the teachings of Scripture, you must stop its practice. And, if it is a matter of Christian liberty, you must not allow division to happen over it. Yet, there are many divisions that have happened because mankind has improperly handled these traditions.

In order to avoid this pitfall, you must train yourself to deal properly with all kinds of tradition. Regarding man-made traditions that fall in the realm of Christian liberty, you must not be guilty of binding your own ideas and opinions on others. If God has not bound the tradition, you must not bind it either! So, you must treat these kinds of traditions in the same way you must treat your personal opinions and judgments relative to the realm of individual liberty.

Failure to submit

The Christian has been given the responsibility to submit himself/herself – in various ways. To “submit” is to yield one’s desires to the desires of another. First and foremost, he/she is expected to submit to God and resist the devil (James 4:7). Certainly, any time a person refuses to submit to God, division will follow (because he/she will not be living in a way that God or God’s people can approve). In addition, the Christian must submit to his/her Christian brothers and sisters. Consider Ephesians 5:21. Paul said, “submitting to one another in the fear of God.” Yet, there are many divisions that happen because people will refuse to give in (in matters of opinion) to their brethren. They demand to have their own ways. They will not listen or go along with the opinions or judgments of others.

In order to avoid this pitfall, you must train yourself to yield to others (in areas of judgment and opinion – not in matters of doctrine). God does not want you fighting with other people just to have your own way about things. Instead, He wants you to be kind and thoughtful of others, willing to sacrifice of yourself.

Failure to think of others

Whenever divisions occur, selfishness is involved. If the division is over a matter of doctrine, someone puts his/her own selfish ambitions above the doctrine of Jesus Christ. And, if the division is over a matter of opinion or judgment, someone puts his/her own interests above the interests of another person or the congregation. Either way, division results whenever you try to put your own interests first and do not consider others above yourself!

In order to avoid this pitfall, you must train yourself to think about others. Certainly, you must seek the will of God first in all things (Matthew 6:33). But, it doesn’t stop there. As we saw from Ephesians 5:21, you must also be willing to put the desires of your brethren ahead of your own. Consider Philippians 2:3-4. “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.” You must learn to be

thoughtful of your brethren by showing them kindness, by being willing to forgive them, by bearing with their weaknesses, etc. In all things, you must remember to love your brethren as you love yourself!

Failure to exercise patience

God has never said that achieving unity would be easy. As we discussed earlier, it requires diligent work on behalf of every member of Christ’s body. That said, some of the divisions that have occurred in the past have happened because Christians failed to be longsuffering with one another. Sometimes, Christians are too quick to divide and too unwilling to put in the hard work to pursue peace and mutual edification in the faith of the gospel of Christ!

In order to avoid this pitfall, you must learn to exercise patience with your brethren. There will be times when a brother or sister holds to a doctrine that is not according to the Scriptures. At this time, you should go to that brother or sister and help him/her come to the knowledge of the truth (like Aquila and Priscilla went to Apollos in Acts 18:24-28). There will be times when brethren do not act like brethren should. There will likely be times when you do not act like you should. While there is a point at which “lines of fellowship” need to be drawn, you need to make sure that you are demonstrating the proper love and patience before you draw these lines. For instance, 2 Timothy 4:2 says that the preacher will need to preach with “all longsuffering and teaching.” And, one of the characteristics of the love God approves is that it “suffers long” and “endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

Conclusion

Has this lesson described your attitude toward unity? You are either contributing to unity or you are contributing to division. You must carefully evaluate your life and decide which is true. Remember, God views it as a good and pleasant thing for brethren to dwell together in unity (Psalm 133:1) – and commands it of those who follow Him. A

failure to contribute to unity, therefore, is sinful and fails to glorify the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit! Are you prepared to answer to God for your attitude toward unity (past and present)? If not, you need to make the necessary changes in your life *today!*

Study Questions

What is “unity”?

1. The Importance Of Unity

List and briefly discuss some passages in which unity is commanded.

Describe some pictures of unity given in the pages of Scripture.

Why is unity important?

2. Essential Elements For Unity

What is the significance of love?

What is the significance of each one abiding in true Bible doctrine?

What is the significance of each one pursue that which makes for peace and edification?

3. Personal Responsibility Toward Unity

Does unity happen accidentally?

How is unity the work of every member?

4. Common Pitfalls To Avoid

How will a failure to accurately interpret God’s word work contrary to unity?

How will improperly handling opinions work contrary to unity?

How will improperly handling traditions work contrary to unity?

How will a failure to submit work contrary to unity?

How will a failure to think of others work contrary to unity?

How will a failure to exercise patience work contrary to unity?