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TRUE CHRISTIAN UNITY

Romans 15:5-6

By

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Romans, Lesson 99

True Christian Unity Romans 15:5-6

Some time ago, a Kudzu cartoon showed a church league softball game where the fundamentalists call, "Strike one! Yer out!" Those from the more liberal churches laugh at the punch line: "Boy, they're strict!"

Then in another Kudzu cartoon, the umpire yells, "Strike three!" Then, "Strike four!" And, "Strike five!" "What's going on," a teammate asks the Rev. Will B. Dunn. "Isn't anyone going to enforce the rules?" The Reverend says nothing. Then in the last frame of the cartoon, the ump bellows, "Strike 96!" Rev. Will exclaims, "I love playing the Unitarians!"

As those cartoons humorously point out, some Christians are so narrow-minded and strict that they would rewrite the rules so that you're out after one strike rather than three. For others, who are not really Christians at all, anything goes. But those cartoons raise a more serious matter: How narrowly or widely should Christians draw the lines of fellowship? Should we be so strict that if you don't believe exactly as we do, we won't associate with you? Or should we allow four strikes or five—or 96?

Each year there are "unity services" held in Flagstaff in an attempt to bring many of the churches together. I'm usually not enthusiastic about these services and sometimes I've been asked why I don't promote them. "After all," the argument goes, "Jesus didn't say that the world will know that we are Christians by our doctrinal agreement, but by our love and unity. So shouldn't we set aside our differences and come together with other churches to show our unity?" Since this is an important issue, we need to think biblically about the matter of true Christian unity. How broadly or narrowly should we draw the lines of Christian fellowship?

It has been estimated that in the early 1980's, there were between 21,000-23,000 Protestant denominations in the world. A more recent estimate puts the number at over 41,000. The Roman Catholic Church often uses this as an argument against Protestants,

since there is only one Catholic Church worldwide. There are also about 60 different Orthodox Churches, stemming from the Great Schism of 1054. Should we all just set aside our differences and come together under one umbrella? If so, which (or whose) umbrella should that be? What is the essence of true Christian unity?

First, we should remember that the Lord Jesus, in His prayer just before He went to the cross, emphasized unity among His followers. In John 17:20-23, He prayed,

“I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even 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 sent Me. The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.”

Evidently, the unity for which Jesus prayed was not just an invisible, spiritual unity, but also a unity that the world can see. This visible unity among believers will make the world know that Jesus was sent to earth by the Father and that believers are the special objects of the Father's love. So this is an important subject for us to think about clearly. The testimony of Christ is at stake!

As we've seen, from Romans 14:1 through 15:13, Paul addresses the potentially divisive issue of how the stronger and weaker believers in Rome should learn to get along and build up one another. The stronger believers were mostly Gentiles who understood that in Christ, we have been freed from observing the Mosaic Law. They did not have scruples regarding kosher meat or Sabbath laws. But the weaker believers (mostly Jewish Christians) could not shake off these things with a clear conscience. And so a potential split could have divided the church along racial lines.

But for Paul, it was crucial that there not be separate Gentile and Jewish churches. It is to God's glory when “Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free-man” (Col. 3:11) could set aside their differences and all come together in Christ as their all in all. So in our text, Paul offers what we

might call a “prayer-wish” or a God-ward wish that God would grant the strong and the weak in Rome to be of the same mind so that they might with one voice glorify God. He’s saying that...

True Christian unity comes from God, is based on Christ Jesus, and results in glory to God.

1. True Christian unity comes from God.

Romans 15:5: “Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus” To say that true unity comes from God is not to say that we have no responsibility in the matter. As we’ve seen, we need to work at harmonious relationships, whether in the home or in the church. They do not happen automatically. We are responsible to pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another (14:19). We must be careful not to put stumbling blocks in a brother’s way. We must be sensitive and gracious toward one another. But, having said all of that, true unity is not something that we can achieve by our efforts. True unity must come from God. So we must seek Him for it.

True unity is not primarily organizational unity. Organizations such as the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches, and the National Association of Evangelicals attempt to forge a type of organizational unity among various denominations. The World Council and National Council have always been theologically liberal, bringing together denominations with a wide spectrum of doctrinal beliefs. The National Association of Evangelicals generally has been more conservative, although their membership includes a denomination whose beliefs include “soul sleep” for believers after death and the complete annihilation of the wicked, rather than eternal punishment. While organizational unity can perhaps achieve some common goals, at its essence, true Christian unity is not organizational.

True unity is not primarily ethnic unity. Sometimes churches unite around a common ethnic heritage or language. While this is understandable if language is an issue, as Paul emphasizes (Col. 3:11), true unity goes beyond ethnic boundaries.

True unity is not primarily cultural unity. Years ago, the church growth movement came out with the homogeneous unit principle,

which is that people like to go to church with others who are culturally similar. So if you want a growing church, you need to target a certain niche and shape your church to reach that niche. So you aim at young urban professionals or at Gen-X'ers or whatever different groups are out there. This helps to bring unity to your church by eliminating the "worship wars," where some like to sing hymns to organ accompaniment, whereas others like ear-splitting rock music. But biblical unity is not primarily cultural unity.

True unity is not primarily outward conformity. Some churches have spoken or unspoken dress codes, where everyone is expected to dress or look a certain way. When we were in Dallas, the elders of the church we attended called me in to tell me that my dress slacks and dress shirt were unacceptable when I taught the young couples class. I needed to add a coat and tie. I told them that they were violating the spirit of James 2 and were excluding people who did not wear that type of clothing. True unity isn't a matter of outward conformity.

True unity comes from God, who gives perseverance and encouragement. The phrase "the God who gives [lit., of] perseverance and encouragement" ties back to verse 4, where Paul says that these qualities come from Scripture. This makes it clear that God is the ultimate author of Scripture and that our unity must come from the God who has revealed Himself in Scripture as we grow in obedience to Scripture. Paul's repeated use of "perseverance and encouragement" in connection with his prayer for unity implies what I have already stated, that unity is not automatic. Perseverance implies that there will be difficulties in relationships that need to be patiently worked through. We will need encouragement from God, since there will be discouragements and setbacks. For us to "be of the same mind with one another," we must grow in the fruit of the Spirit as we work through our differences in dependence on God.

2. True Christian unity is based on Christ Jesus.

Paul prays that God may "grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus" C. H. Spurgeon put it (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 47:552), "We shall be likeminded with one another when we become likeminded with Christ; but not till then." But, what does Paul mean when he prays that God would grant us "to be of the same mind"?

- A. True Christian unity is not a matter of agreeing on every minor point of doctrine or practice.

We have already encountered this phrase in Romans 12:16, where Paul commanded, "Be of the same mind toward one another." (He also uses it or similar expressions in 1 Cor. 1:10; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 1:27; 2:2; 4:2.) He was not insisting that we all think alike or agree on every issue, which he knew would never happen in this life. Paul and Barnabas did not agree on whether to take Mark on the second missionary journey (Acts 15:36-40). Here in Romans 14 & 15, Paul recognized that differences would exist between the weak and the strong. He has not urged them to come to total agreement on every issue, but rather to be considerate of one another (15:2). So he is calling us to a unity that is based on our common salvation in Christ, our shared purpose in the gospel, and our shared hope in Christ. Thus ...

- B. True Christian unity is based on Christ Jesus.

But even here we need to be careful. The Mormons claim to be "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints." We would also claim to be the church of Jesus Christ and we believe that we are saints who are living in the last days. So are we one with them in Christ? Hardly! The Jehovah's Witnesses also profess to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, but they deny His deity. Are we one with them? Although one popular preacher who always smiles and doesn't judge anyone says that these groups are following the same Jesus, I hope that you realize that we're *not* one with them!

It's helpful to note the distinction that Paul draws in Ephesians 4 between two types of unity. In verse 3 he says that we are to be diligent "to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." But in verses 11-12 he says that the work of pastors and teachers in equipping the saints for the work of ministry is (4:13) "until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ." The unity of the Spirit already exists through the new birth. We are exhorted to *preserve it* in the bond of peace. The unity of the faith is something that we *attain to* as we mature in our knowledge of Jesus Christ. The unity of the Spirit is true of all believers by virtue of the fact that the Holy Spirit has baptized us into the one body of Christ (1 Cor.

12:13). The unity of the faith grows over time as believers grow in their understanding of biblical truth about Christ.

It's also helpful to understand that there are different degrees of importance among biblical doctrines (Matt. 22:34-40; 23:23-24). Some doctrines are *absolutely essential for salvation*. I don't mean that you must understand all these truths to get saved. A person gets saved by believing in Jesus as his Savior and Lord. I mean that to deny these truths knowingly is to deny the Christian faith. All true believers affirm these truths, which include:

The divine inspiration and authority of the Bible; the triune nature of the one God as three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; God as the creator of all that is; the full deity and true humanity of Jesus Christ; the sinfulness of the human race; the necessity of the new birth; Christ's substitutionary atonement for our sins; salvation by grace through faith alone, apart from works; the necessity of growth in holiness for all believers; Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead; His bodily second coming in power and glory to judge the living and the dead; eternal glory with Him in heaven for believers and eternal punishment in hell for unbelievers; and, the personality and work of Satan. We are not unified with anyone who denies these essential truths.

Then there are other doctrines that are *important* for the Christian life, but they are *areas where true believers disagree*. There are varying degrees of importance with regard to these doctrines: some border on the essential, while others are less important. I would argue that what you believe about the more important issues will impact the way you understand God and His ways and the way you live out your Christian life.

These important doctrines include biblical views on: the specifics of the creation account; God's sovereignty in choosing us for salvation apart from any foreseen faith on our part; the security of salvation for God's elect; how to deal with trials; how to gain victory over sin; the role of psychology in Christian counseling; Christian marriage and family roles; the role of men and women in the church; church government; the place (if any) for the charismatic gifts; the meaning, mode, and subjects of baptism; the meaning of the Lord's Supper; various methods to use in Christian work; and, biblical details about the end times.

Our level of agreement on these issues may determine how close of a personal friendship we may form with another believer. On a church-wide level, we have to think through whether the church should accept into membership the person who differs on one or more of these matters. Will accepting the person into membership lead to dissension or factions in the church? And as a church we need to decide on a case by case basis how closely we can work in areas like evangelism, pro-life causes, or help for the homeless with other churches that differ on some of these matters. I admit that this is not always easy to sort out!

Then there is a third level of doctrine that we could call *interesting, but not essential or important*. These doctrines won't affect the way you live your Christian life. They include minor details of interpretation of difficult or obscure texts. We should study these matters because they're in the Bible and we may hold personal opinions on them, but we should not divide from other believers over them. Some examples include: Who were the sons of God and daughters of men in Genesis 6? When will the battle in Ezekiel 38 and 39 take place? Did Christ descend into hell between His death and resurrection (1 Pet. 3:19-20)? What was Paul's thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:7)? Did Paul write Galatians to north or south Galatia?

But the main point is, true Christian unity is based on Christ Jesus. We are "to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus."

3. True Christian unity results in glory to God.

Romans 15:6: "... so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Note two things here:

- A. True Christian unity begins on the heart level, but expresses itself outwardly in God-glorifying worship.

"With one accord" points toward the heart level. In other words, our unity should not be an outward show, while our hearts are at odds with one another. God looks on the heart. As Paul put it (Rom. 12:9), our love must be without hypocrisy. But then flowing out of hearts that are in one accord, we should express our

common salvation in God-glorifying worship: “you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

For Paul, the main reason that we should be of the same mind with one another is not so that we all will be happy and get along with one another, although that is important. The main reason for true Christian unity is that it results in glory to God. When people from diverse backgrounds and personalities and ages join together in unified worship, the world will marvel, “How is it that these people who are so different all love one another?” So unified, God-glorifying worship is important for our testimony to a world that is so fractured and contentious.

Jonathan Edwards rightly argued that the purpose for which God created the world is His own glory (see John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory* [Crossway Books]). If that is so, we must evaluate everything in our personal lives and in our corporate church life by the criterion, “Does this glorify God?” As Paul puts it (1 Cor. 10:31), “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” Does my thought life glorify God? Do my attitudes glorify God? Do my words glorify God? Does how I spend my time glorify God? Does my behavior glorify God? Do my relationships at home and at church glorify God? Does my management of the resources God has entrusted to me glorify Him? Does my commitment to the church and my worship with God's saints glorify Him?

B. God is truly glorified when we worship Him in truth.

Paul says that we are to “glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul uses that same expression elsewhere (2 Cor. 1:3; 11:31; Eph. 1:3; cf., also, Col. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:3). But why does he put it that way here? It seems to me that this emphasizes the fact that we are to worship not only in spirit (“with one accord,” “with one voice”), but also in truth (John 4:24). We do not truly glorify God unless we worship Him as He has revealed Himself to us in His Word.

The phrase emphasizes the priority of God the Father in the trinity; and both the deity and the humanity of the Lord Jesus Christ. While the three members of the trinity are all equally God, there is a hierarchy in which the Son submits to the Father and the

Spirit submits to the Father and the Son. Jesus is the eternal Son of God the Father, which shows that He is God (John 5:18). Paul's reference to "our Lord Jesus Christ" also calls attention to His deity and His humanity. He had to be both God ("our Lord") and man ("Jesus") to secure our salvation.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus normally called God "Father," although He also called Him "my God" (Matt. 27:46; John 20:17; cf. Eph. 1:17; Heb. 1:9), showing His true humanity and His dependence on God. When Jesus was on earth, He glorified the Father (John 17:4), which we are now to do. Just as God the Father and God the Son are one, so we glorify Him through our unified worship in spirit and in truth. So we cannot join in unity with any who deny the trinity or the two natures of Christ, because they cannot worship Him in truth.

Conclusion

During World War II, a missionary who served in Calcutta was profoundly influenced by a communion service she attended. The leader was a Swedish minister. Among those present were a Chinese pastor, a Japanese teacher, a German doctor, several English citizens, and a small group of Indian believers. The missionary recalled that as she looked at that diverse company she felt a closeness to each person, especially when they partook of the bread and the cup. That bond of Christian fellowship was real, even though some of those people were from countries that were enemies in that brutal war ("Our Daily Bread," Winter, 1980-81).

True Christian unity transcends differences in race, culture, age, gender, and background. It transcends differences over secondary doctrines or practices. True Christian unity comes from God, is based on Christ Jesus, and results in glory to God. May we all grow in our understanding and practice of true Christian unity to God's glory!

Application Questions

1. What are the potential advantages and disadvantages of a local church joining an organization for Christian unity?
2. How would you counter the Roman Catholic criticism of the many Protestant denominations? Why is the Catholic Church “unified”? Is this for her good or not?
3. What criteria should a local church use to decide whether to join a community “unity” service or project?
4. Do you agree with the lists of “essential” and “important” doctrines? Would you add to, subtract, or change the priority level of any of them? If so, why?

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