

## The Necessity of Unity in *Reaching Beyond*

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One of the biggest turn offs I hear from unchurched people goes something like this: “Why are there so many different kinds of churches? Why do you have the Lutherans and Catholics, Baptists and Methodists? Why can’t you all get along?” I bet you’ve heard something like that, too. Maybe you’ve thought yourself. The thought of Christians fighting is a turn off, isn’t it? Why would I want to be a part of something that’s so divisive?

Or boil it down a little bit. Instead of talking about different denominations, how about fighting and disharmony in one particular church. I would venture to say that if there’s been times in your life when you’ve been discouraged about coming to church is had to do with some sort of conflict between brothers and sisters. We can bear with a lot and not be discouraged, but throw in some nasty church fights and it’s enough to make the most faithful follower quit.

The unity of the church of Jesus Christ is absolutely essential. It’s not icing on the cake; something that’s nice to have, but optional. It is absolutely a fundamental need for God’s people. A bunch of things can cause disharmony and fights, right? But they all fall under the big umbrella of “sin.” But I want to be more specific than that. Sure, sin is the problem, but what are the ways sin takes root in a church. Sin can alter our thinking. I really believe one of the primary mistakes the Christian church has made in the last 50 years or so has been thinking -- wrongly, I might add -- that Christian maturity is best viewed in the knowledge we possess rather than in the love we share (REPEAT). Why is that? Why do we think that the sign of Christian maturity, the sign of Christian growth, is how much Bible we know? I’m not sure, because the Bible keeps lifting up our love for each other.

- John 13:35, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for each other.”
- 1 John 4:20, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen can not love God whom he has not seen.”
- Gal. 5:22-23, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love (for others), joy, peace (with your brothers and sisters), patience (for people slower than you), kindness (towards those who annoy you), goodness (to those who disagree with you), faithfulness (to God and others with your speech), gentleness (with those who may need correction), self-control; against such things there is no law.”

In fact, the entire law, Jesus said, could be summed up in this one command: love God and love other people, which we’ve reworded, “Treasuring God; Loving people.” To be a Christian, to follow the Lord, is to be loving towards others and united with the body of Christ. Yes, absolutely, we need to know things (know facts and scripture), but if we don’t have love we’re just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

That's why our 2nd goal of the Reaching Beyond campaign goes like this: *That all FBCers would participate together in this campaign and stay united in reaching unsaved people in Taylor County and beyond.* The key words are *together* and *united*. We believed and were hopeful that no matter the opinions and thoughts of how we're moving forward in this campaign, we could all fruitfully participate in this campaign together somehow... through prayer, giving, encouragement or service. And your leaders also believed that no matter what we could be united together in reaching people who are unsaved. Our message today is all about reaching and achieving this goal; staying together, staying united as brothers and sisters.

But what does that mean? What does it mean to stay united together? Practically speaking this is what that might look like: That there's no animosity or bitterness that we have towards one another. That we're not going home with anger in our hearts. That we can joyfully link arms and work together so people know God. That we can break bread together; that the relationships remain intact in such away that fellowship is not broken. And finally, that our commitment to spreading the good news of Jesus supercedes less important matters. These are little pictures of what staying united will look like. So, how do we get there?

Back in November of 2014, I preached a sermon on unity from Psalm 133. The main point of that sermon was to highlight from the text that unity is both holy and fruitful. Unity is holy in that it shows that God is at work in life of a community. Unity is fruitful in that it's the fertile soil where God accomplishes his missional work.

Then about a month later I wrote an article in the Body Lifeline on unity that focused on a definition of unity. I tried to highlight that unity is a reality Jesus actually purchased for us on the cross. Unity is actually a gift of his passion. When Jesus died on the cross, he broke down the walls of hostility and anger that separate people. Because he paid for those sins and overcame those differences, we are one in Jesus - already! When I remind myself of that I marvel at God's grace!

Today, we want to look at this question: why is unity essential for us to reach people for Christ? Why *must* we be united? The answer is found in John 17 (READ John 17:20-23).

Jesus says some crazy-glorious things in John 17 (crazy-glorious - that's a very technical theological term I wanted to introduce to you today). Let's make some observations.

Notice how earnest Jesus is for his followers to be united. Jesus is praying for our unity. He says to his Father in this prayer in vs. 20, "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." That's the goal, my father. That's my desire. My hope is that when they hear my word from my disciples they will become one. I'm asking you, God, for this.

Later in vs. 23 he says his prayer is that his people “become perfectly one.” Perfectly. That word also means to *fulfill* or to *complete*. “Fill their unity to the brim!” Jesus is saying. Judah loves soda - he doesn’t get it very often for obvious reasons. But, he loves it even more when I fill his cup to the brim. When we go out to eat and he gets his own cup to put whatever weird mixture of pop he can find... he fills it all the way up. He perfects it to the top. That’s what Jesus is getting at; “Don’t just give them unity, Father. Perfect their unity. Fill them up completely and totally with unity!”

This is Jesus’ prayer for us. Here’s what I’m thinking: if this is Jesus’ prayer for us, he really, really wants this for us. Do you know that I don’t pray for cloudy days. I hate to admit I don’t pray for vegetables. I don’t pray that the Cowboys win the Super Bowl. I don’t want those things; those things are not my desire. I pray for those things that I desire. “God, may my children delight in your grace. God, please keep us in your care. Father, don’t let the Evil One gain influence in this church.” I want these things; I need these things. They feel beyond my ability to control so I’m pleading God for them. And Jesus, our Lord and Savior, is doing that for us. It’s amazing to think this is Jesus’ prayer for us.

But why? Why is Jesus praying for our unity? He answers that question really clearly; just look at the text. First, look at vs. 21 (READ). Any time you read a *so that* in your Bible, you are reading purpose. Isn’t that great; God tells us why he does what he does? Here’s the purpose I want my people united; “*so that* the world may believe that you (Father) have sent me.” Jesus gets at this purpose another way in vs. 23 (READ).

Notice how unity makes a difference for the world. In this passage, there are 4 groups of people (if you will). There’s the Father, the Son, those who believe the word of God, and the world. Listen to how Jesus has these two different groups in mind... those who believe and the world.

- vs. 14, “I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world.”
- vs. 16, “They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.”
- vs. 18, “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.”

Do you see how Jesus has these two groups of people in mind in this prayer; those who believe and the world? And what does Jesus want for the world? He wants the world to believe. He wants the world to see the great love of the Father. That’s remarkable in and of itself. Why? Because the world hates the things of God; the world hates Jesus. Jesus rebukes the world’s sin; Jesus exposes the world’s lies. And the world hates Jesus for it; and the world hates the people of God for it, too. Yet, Jesus loves the world and wants the world to be saved.

How will that happen? How will the world see the love of God? In the love we have for each other; the world will see God’s love in our unity (REPEAT). Are you seeing how important our unity is? Oh, it’s critical. Do you know why the world sees God’s love in our

love and unity for each other? Because unity is so unnatural. It's so foreign. There is fighting, hostility, disharmony everywhere. Politicians can't work together in Washington. City councils bicker about zoning. Juries can't agree on guilt or innocence. Coworkers fight about vacation time and marketing plans. Families fight about when to hold Christmas. Brothers and sisters argue about who gets the inheritance. Husbands and wives fight about... everything. Have you ever been in a fight with your spouse and eventually thought, "I'm not even sure what we're fighting about anymore." There world is characterized by so much hostility and animosity.

But there's this church family called FBC. They are different. It's the weirdest thing. There's a bunch of them; like well over 400 of them. There's a bunch of young families, but a lot senior citizens, too. They don't all live in the same community, but they all care about the same thing. Some are rich and some are poor. There are as many men as women. It's a Baptist church, but some grew up Lutheran, others Catholic, others didn't grow up in church at all. Some like the music loud and rockin', others like the music traditional.

But they get along. They work together. They're patient with each other and they help each other out, even with money and stuff. They speak well of each other in public. They don't all agree; I've heard them in passionate debate. But they that doesn't change how they love each other and work together. It's weird. (If only this were perfectly true of us.)

Are you getting it, friends? In a world that disagrees about everything, that fights about anything, how can it be that over 150 families pool \$3.5M together (all giving different amounts) to build a building for more ministry? How can they do that and stay friends? How can they do that without gossiping and backstabbing? It just doesn't makes sense. I'll tell you how? It's a God-thing. That's what unity does, my friends. It's a divine thing; unity says, "God must be here; it's the only way to explain how such a radical thing can happen with so much harmony."

This is why unity is so important. This is why unity is a goal. We can't reach beyond without being united together. Unity says to an unbelieving world, "God's love must be real, because no group can sacrifice so much, give so much and love each other so much and accomplish so much together."

I'm wondering if your heart is joining Jesus in his prayer; God make us one. Please, Father, make FBC united together. I'm sure it is because I know you want to follow God. But maybe you're still thinking, "But Brian, we still disagree about stuff. I think there should be more SS classrooms. I think the foyer is too big. I think this isn't the right time to build. I think we should do this in phases." We still all have our thoughts, don't we? Our preferences and opinions. And they are strong, too. I have strong opinions. How can we be united with these differences? Jesus gives us the answer in vs. 22 (READ vs. 22).

That is one of those crazy-awesome statements. Jesus says, "To be one, to be united the glory that you have given me, Father, I have given them." Just let that statement sink in. The glory, the excellence, the splendor the Father gave Jesus, Jesus turns around and gives to us. Notice, Jesus says, "I have given to them." It doesn't say, "I will eventually, sometime in the future, when they finally get their act together, give them that glory, too." No! I have given it to them... already! Amazing. And that glory that we've received from Jesus is the means or way we stay one.

The big question is: What is that glory? What is that glory that Jesus has and then he has given to us so that we stay one? This is a hard question because it's not so clear. But my mind went straight to John 1:14 that reads this way, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." It seems John is linking the glory of Jesus to his brimming qualities of grace and truth. Jesus has given us that same glory. He's given us grace; he's given us truth. And when we live in light of the grace and truth of God together, we will find unity. What does that mean? Here are some examples.

Grace - When my brother has an idea, rather than rolling my eyes because I'm already sold on my idea, I graciously look to him and say, "Tell me! I want to hear." When our sister kindly asks, "But why don't we have more...." we graciously listen because we want to learn from her observations. When our deacons humbly say, "Church, we believe God is leading us here," we're filled with grace and patience believing they want to lead us in a good and healthy way. How can be in disharmony when we are filled with grace towards each other?

Truth - When I'm struggling to get on board, rather than keeping that to myself, hiding my true feelings, grumbling in a corner, I'm honest and say, "I'm struggling to get on a board. Help me understand." I live with integrity, not trying to be manipulative or cunning - that's God's truth manifested in our lives. I seek to be honest with myself and with others about my true motivations. Is there selfishness in my thoughts; do I care about earthly gain more than heavenly gain? I'm truthful.

Friends, when we are filled with God's grace and truth, we will live as one. And the great news from Jesus is that he has already given us that glory. All we need to do is put it into operation.

I feel it's really important to answer this question: how can we be united together and work towards the same goal when we disagree about the plan (or whatever)? Here's the answer: by agreeing on what's most important. The Wipfs took a trip to the Dells earlier this year; it was a trip filled with fun. We all loved it. Do you know what we didn't fight about? How to get there. I'm guessing if I took vote, "which car should we drive, mom or dad's" we would have had differing opinions. But we didn't fight about that. Why? Because we were going to the Dells! Who cares? That's more important than what car we drive. Friends, it works this way in the church. When we are all sold on our God, our mission to reach Taylor

County, the other factors aren't so important. Where the SS classrooms go; how big's the kitchen; and yes, even how much it will cost. These are important, yes; they make an impact. But they're not as important as God, the gospel, our relationships and our mission? And when we value them more highly than lesser things, we can stay united in spite of our disagreements. When we can't, we'll fight about everything.

May Taylor County know that God's love for them is real because they see God's love in how we treat each other, God's very representatives to this lost and dying world. What a great way to Reach Beyond.

Small Group Questions  
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1. Where have you experienced disharmony and hostility in your relationships? What were your feelings and thoughts going through it?
2. Why do you think fighting and disharmony in the church is such a discouragement to those who come and so unattractive to those watching from the outside?
3. Pastor Brian said that he feels churches have wrongly defined Christian maturity by one's Bible knowledge rather than their love for each other. Do you agree with that? Why or why not?
4. Read John 17:20-23 again to be reminded of the passage
5. What sticks out to you the most from these verses? What grabs you? Why?
6. Are you convinced from these passages that Jesus is saying that the world will see and believe in God's love by seeing the unity of his people? Reread vs. 21 and 23 if needed.
7. What's the potential for disharmony about the *Reaching Beyond* campaign? Is this a time when conflict and hostility could be greater or is it the same as any other time in the life of a church?
8. Jesus says in vs. 22 that he gives his people the glory given to him from the Father "that they may be one even as we are one." Pastor Brian linked this to the grace and truth of Jesus found in John 1:14. How does grace and truth help make a church one?
9. How are you tempted towards disunity? Anger towards those who disagree with you? Indifference and apathy? Gossip? Other ways?
10. What do you do to try and remain one with your brothers and sisters?
11. What's one thing you can do differently to contribute to the unity of the body?
12. Is complete agreement necessary to be united? Why or why not?