

Unity and Fellowship of Church

A Study in Spiritual Gifts (part 4)

Summary: The Church is one in essence, because it is founded on one gospel, united to one Lord and indwelt by one Spirit. Its unity is under constant threat because of the tendency to division that is inherent in fallen humanity, and needs to be continually maintained and actively expressed in fellowship.

Scripture: Philippians 2:1–13; John 17:20–26

Date: Sunday, 8 October 2023 (Narellan Cong)

Introduction

Music We Know & Music We Don't

Last Sunday, the first song, “Your Glory Be Ever Known”, was not sung as heartily as the second, “The Heart Of Worship”, likely because more people were familiar with the second than the first, although we have sung the first here a number of times. However, our own Music Team Leader, surprisingly, knew the first song but not the second. For our benefit, he learned them both, since he would be leading us in singing them both.

When I choose the songs, how am I to know what we know and what we do not know? Who knows what song versus another?

Perhaps it is best to assume what you are used to is not the same as everyone else, and to adopt a measure of humility for the sake of our community, for what we are used to is not a good measure for truth, goodness nor beauty, especially when it distracts us from maintaining unity and love toward each other.

The Church is one in essence, because it is founded on one Gospel, united to one Lord and indwelt by one Spirit. Its unity is under constant threat because of the tendency to division that is inherent in fallen humanity, and needs to be continually maintained and actively expressed in fellowship. Sadly, the gifts of the Holy Spirit have been a source of division, so I thought it would be good for us to have this excursus in our series.

The Unity of the Church

The Church Is One

Let me begin by taking us back to basics, to a first principle described by Paul the apostle this way:

in the same way we who are many are one body in Christ and individually members of one another. (Romans 12:5)^{1 2}

The Church is one. To be divided is to not be the Church.

This oneness is Jesus' prayer for us:

May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me. (John 17:21)

How is the Church one?

The Church Transcends All Barriers

In Christ there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all.
(Colossians 3:11)

For those of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:27–28)³

While there were clearly many ways they were distinct from each other, the great divide threatening the first Christians was between Jew and Gentile (or “Greek”), but the Church was able to unite the two into one body in Christ, to bring people together despite what distinguished them.

The Church is, in fact, the greatest people movement in history for it transcends age, sex, class, education, income, culture, etc. **The Church transcends all barriers.**

The Church’s Unity Reflects the Unity Within the Trinity

And when it does this, **the Church’s unity reflects the unity within the Trinity:**

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope at your calling—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:4–6)⁴

Just as the triune God is one Spirit, one Lord, one Father united in perfect love and purpose, so too should we.

The Church’s Unity Is the Work of the Trinity

Because the Trinity is so united, **the Church’s unity is the work of the Trinity**, an essential expression the Eternal Purpose:

[Jesus] did [brought peace between Jew and Gentile] so that he might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross by which he put the hostility to death. He came and proclaimed the good news of peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. (Ephesians 2:16–18)⁵

Reconciliation is at the heart of the Purpose of God.

While it may seem obvious, it is a fair question why reconciliation with God and each other—in other words, unity—is at the heart of the Purpose of God?

The Purpose of the Church’s Unity

When we think about the purpose of the Church’s unity, there are two that stand out:

The purpose of the unity of the Church is **to lead others to faith:**

I am in them and you are in me, so that they may be made completely one, that the world may know you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me. (John 17:23; see also Jn 17:21)

Another purpose of the unity of the Church is **to lead believers to maturity:**

until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son,
growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ's fullness.
(Ephesians 4:13)

The Church's Unity Is Expressed in Fellowship

Since the Church's unity leads people to place their faith in Jesus and equips them to mature in their faith and lifestyle, we must next ask how is that unity to be expressed? In a word, the Church's unity is our fellowship.

Firstly, together, we have **fellowship with God**:

God is faithful; you were called by him into fellowship with his Son, Jesus
Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:9)⁶

Our fellowship with God begins as an individualistic knowledge and attitude, but then becomes a common interest we share with others, with joy in the sharing.

I experienced this firsthand when my wife and I travelled through India. We chose to worship one Sunday at an English service. When they discovered I was a Youth Pastor, I was invited to share my testimony. The congregation wanted to hear our story of faith. That is fellowship that crosses language and cultures, and geography, among other things.

Like all shared common interests, our **fellowship is expressed by meeting together**:

Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple, and
broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with joyful and sincere
hearts (Acts 2:46)⁷

When I took up running, I happened to come across a racing event in my local area, only to discover this event was held by a local running club, which I have now been a member of for more than 10 years.

We naturally gather with those whom we share a common interest with and it is no different in the Church.

Fellowship is expressed through sharing resources:

Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. They
sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as any
had need. (Acts 2:44–45)⁸

My running club hosts running events where we travel and stay together. The same has been true in the Church from its earliest days.

Fellowship is also shared through suffering:

I, John, your brother and partner in the affliction, kingdom, and endurance
that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God
and the testimony of Jesus. (Revelation 1:9)⁹

To run is to suffer and my running club mates love to regale each other with tales of our suffering (at our own hands). In the Church, we learn from each other's suffering and support each other.

While in many ways similar, what makes the fellowship of my running club very different to that of the Church is that we have **fellowship through shared spiritual blessings**:

Now I do all this because of the gospel, so that I may share in the blessings.
(1 Corinthians 9:23)¹⁰

When the friends of Jesus gather to share our common interest in maturing our faith and lifestyle, our fellowship is based on what we share but is far superior to any other fellowship because it connects us with our creator and will last for eternity and beyond!

Specific Actions Which Express Fellowship and Unity in the Church

There are specific actions which express fellowship and unity in the Church. For example, we **share in the Lord's Supper**:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?
The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, since all of us share the one bread. (1 Corinthians 10:16–17)¹¹

Christ Jesus 'instituted' our sharing in communion specifically as an act to bring about our unity, a unity which some of us are not currently enjoying here at Narellan Cong!

After discussion among the Elders, we decided to introduce a second method for sharing The Lord's Supper. *Intinction* is a direct and personal way to receive Communion, which involves processing forward to dip bread into a common cup of juice. *Passing the Elements*, using trays and individual cups, and waiting until all have received the elements before partaking together, emphasises unity and community. Having two methods allows us to focus on different aspects of our communion with Christ and with each other.

To say one is more biblical than the other is to ignore the fact there is no specific biblical instructions for how to commemorate The Lord's Supper because the method is not the point! Our communion with Christ and with each other is the point. We come closest to the biblical example once a year on Maundy Thursday, but what we do once a month (and later in this service) looks nothing like the first disciples sharing the Lord's last supper with him.

However, some of you are not focussing on our communion with Christ and each other, but are instead focussing on the method. You are distracted because you have been asked to do something you are not used to doing.

Remember, the method of sharing depends on the tradition, theology, and liturgical practice of whatever church you attended prior to joining us here. You are used to doing what you are used to because your preferences developed at that other church.

The fact is we are a mixed group of people coming from mixed backgrounds and a variety of churches. When we do something you are not used to, you must keep in mind that is something someone else is used to and vice versa. The discomfort you feel once in a while is also experienced by others, although maybe at a different point in the service or sacrament. If one of our two methods is not one you are used to, then remember that neither is what I

am used to, so by conducting our sacrament at all, I am being forced to compromise also. If we shared Communion the way I am used to, we would not share it at all.

With whatever method we use to share the Sacrament of The Lord's Supper, our reason for doing so is because our Lord wants us to be united in commemorating his sacrifice on our behalf. Your discomfort pales in comparison to his discomfort, and your comfort or my comfort are not even the point of our worship at all.

There is another action which expresses fellowship and unity in the Church.

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope at your calling—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:4–6; see also 1 Co 12:13)

Baptism is an expression of unity. Besides sharing the sacraments of The Lord's Supper and Baptism, other actions that express our unity include **extending hospitality**,¹² **greeting one another**,¹³ and **welcoming former opponents**.¹⁴

There are many ways we show our unity in the Church and in this church.

Warnings Against Divisions in the Church

Besides these actions which express unity in the Church, there are, not surprisingly, causes of division in the Church. **Personal ambition**,¹⁵ **ethnic tension** (Ac 6:1), **differences of opinion**,¹⁶ the **trouble caused by heretical or fallen leaders**,¹⁷ a **partisan spirit**¹⁸ and **greed**¹⁹ are all sources of division in churches.

In the spirit of Christ, Paul the apostle warned against divisions in the Church:

Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction. (1 Corinthians 1:10)²⁰

Surprisingly though, there are acceptable differences in the Church.

In **secondary matters of conscience**, Christians are to respect rather than judge each other. These things need not impair the essential unity that we share in Christ.²¹ The upcoming referendum is a perfect example. As this constitutional change is a civic and political matter, we are all free to vote in line with our consciences, and our different opinions on this matter need not be a divisive issue.

It is also acceptable that there are **varieties of spiritual gifts**.²² These differences should be celebrated and utilised, yet too often they can lead to division.

Where there are divisions to avoid and then acceptable divisions, there are also necessary divisions in the Church. There is a necessary division in the Church **between the true Gospel and heretical alternatives**.²³ There is a necessary division **between those truly committed to Jesus Christ, and those apparently part of the Church, but living sinful lives**.²⁴ There is also a necessary division over **essential Gospel principles**.²⁵ We are to distinguish ourselves from others on these issues.

Divisions too easily and too often disrupt the unity and fellowship of the Church, which is to be protected at all costs. Let us be certain to avoid the divisions we are warned against, while acknowledge that which is acceptable and uphold that which is necessary.

Conclusion

Paul the apostle said it best:

If, then, there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, make my joy complete by thinking the same way, having the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. (Philippians 2:1–2)

We do not need to think the same on all matters, but we do need to be united on what matters. And what matters is that we are united in maintaining our fellowship, so that we might grow together toward maturity in our knowledge of Jesus and wisdom in our lifestyle, following Christ's example.

The Church, of which our church community is a local expression, is one in essence, because it is founded on one Gospel, united to one Lord and indwelt by one Spirit. Our unity is under constant threat and needs to be continually maintained and actively expressed in fellowship.

Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 2 See also 1 Co 12:12; 1 Co 12:20; Eph 4:25.
- 3 See also Jn 10:16; Ac 10:28–29; Ac 10:47; Ac 15:8–9; Eph 2:14–16; Eph 3:6.
- 4 See also Jn 17:11; Ro 3:29–30; Ro 10:12–13; Ga 3:27–28.
- 5 See also Jn 11:52; Ac 10:45–47; 1 Co 12:13; Eph 2:22; Eph 4:3.
- 6 See also 2 Co 13:14; Php 2:1; 2 Pe 1:4; 1 Jn 1:3; 1 Jn 1:6–7.
- 7 See also Ac 2:1; Ac 2:42; Ac 5:12; Ac 6:2; 1 Co 14:26; Heb 10:25.
- 8 See also Ac 4:32; Ac 4:34–37; Ac 11:27–30; Ro 15:26; 1 Co 16:1–2; 2 Co 8:2–5; 2 Co 8:13–14; 2 Co 9:13; Php 4:14–18.
- 9 See also Ro 8:17; 2 Co 1:7; Php 3:10; Php 4:14; Heb 10:33–34; Heb 13:3.
- 10 See also Ro 11:17; Php 1:7; 2 Th 2:14; 1 Pe 5:1; Jud 3.
- 11 See also Ac 2:46; Ac 20:7; 1 Co 11:33.
- 12 See Ac 28:7; Ro 12:13; Ro 16:23; 1 Ti 5:10; Tt 1:8; 1 Pe 4:9; 3 Jn 8.
- 13 See Ac 18:27; Ro 16:3–16; 1 Co 16:19–20; Col 4:10; Phm 17.
- 14 See Ac 9:26–27; Ga 2:9; 2 Co 2:5–8.
- 15 See Mk 9:34; Mk 10:35–41.
- 16 See Ac 15:37–40; Php 4:2.

- 17 See Ro 16:17; Jud 19.
- 18 See 1 Co 1:11–12; 1 Co 3:3–4; cf. 1 Co 6:1–6.
- 19 See 1 Co 11:18; 1 Co 11:20–21; Jas 4:1–3.
- 20 See also Ro 12:16; Ro 16:17; 2 Co 12:20; Eph 4:31; Jas 4:11.
- 21 See Ro 14:1–3; Ro 14:5–6; 1 Co 8:9–13.
- 22 See 1 Co 12:4–6; 1 Co 12:14–25; Ga 2:7.
- 23 See 2 Co 11:2–6; 2 Co 11:13–15; Ga 1:6–9; Col 2:8; Col 2:16–19; 1 Ti 4:1–6; 1 Jn 2:18–19; 2 Jn 9–11; Jud 18–20.
- 24 See 1 Co 5:9–10; 2 Th 3:6; 1 Ti 6:3–5; 2 Ti 3:2–9; 2 Pe 1:20–21; 2 Pe 2:1–3; Re 2:20; Re 2:24; Re 3:1; Re 3:4.
- 25 See Ac 15:2; Ac 15:5–6; Ac 15:19; Ga 2:11.