

## The Unity of the Body

**Colossians 3:8-11** *But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. <sup>9</sup> Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, <sup>10</sup> and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, <sup>11</sup> where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.*

Coming from the world into the church is like going from rural China to New York City. There is a huge culture shock, when a church is seeking to be a New Testament church, not a form of Sunday entertainment, or a religious outlet for worldly people. It is like nothing less than entering an alien world. If you are expecting from the church more of the same that you get in the world, you will be shocked, dazed, maybe even disappointed. I am not only referring to the ideas and practices of the world, I am speaking of the world's concept of community, and the Bible's concept of unity.

Our world has created a culture of self-centredness and individualism. We live in houses, we don't really live in communities, in the old sense of the term. We live in private houses and then we get into our little metal universe we call a car, and we switch on the radio to create the illusion that someone is with us. We get to work, where we are not working as a community towards goals that are meaningful to all of us. We work because we have a job, and we will be paid to do it. Employers desperately try to build 'team-spirit' because it isn't there naturally. Everyone is basically a mercenary - they have a skill for sale.

From there we get back on the road and pass thousands of people we do not know, and probably never will know. We come home to our private homes and switch on the television and there we immerse ourselves in the make-believe world of entertainment; feeling that we are connected with others because we have watched the news or some current affairs programme. Or we go on the Internet where we are again in a universe of text with people we will not see.

Outside of that, we go to the mall, where we pass a sea of faces we don't know, and go about buying things from people we don't know. Most people we meet are strangers we will probably never see again.

Everywhere we turn, technology and mass culture have stripped us of real belonging and accountability that used to exist in small towns, folk cultures and even tribes. Now, you can basically live only superficially connected to other people, but still have money, physical needs met and leisure as well. In other words, you can be autonomous and self-centred in today's world, and never notice that you are, because that is how everyone lives.

I am not saying that these things are your fault. These things are the world you inherited. I am not saying you do not have a circle of friends or that you do not love your immediate family. I am saying that the concept of a real community of people is almost lost on us.

But one place where you will definitely notice community is if you encounter church as it is supposed to be done. True church membership, and unity and participation, is true community, organic unity.

But the problem is, if we are not careful, we can import this individualized, autonomous way of living, into our view of church. Since it is true in every other area of life, we don't see why it shouldn't be true of church.

What does it look like when we bring individualism into church?

When we import the world's ideas of community into church, then the church becomes simply a big

religious service organisation. I am the Christian needing some teaching, the church services me with teaching. I am thankful for that teaching – I go my way and try to implement it.

I am the Christian needing to have some people around me who agree with my Christianity. The church provides a venue, a forum where that happens. I come, and the church services me with a sense of companionship.

I am the Christian needing prayer for my needs. The church is the organisation which services me with prayer.

Now, the church does in fact do all the above. And it is not wrong to seek such things. The problem is that if these are the only things in the mind of the Christian, then the person is actually still quite self-centred. Church is about supplying me with teaching, church is about supplying me with people around me, church is about supplying me with prayer. I am not saying that such a person doesn't not think of returning friendship, or being thankful. I am saying the person has not noticed that they are supposed to be part of something which is bigger than their own private lives.

They are to belong to something which will not only service them, but require service. It will not only help them to do certain things, it will call them to self denial in order to help it. It will not only give them instructions for personal application, but will, as all true communities do, watch over them to make sure they do it.

Such a church is more than a place which affirms my personal identity in Christ. It is a place where I am one part of a corporate identity in Christ - so much so, that in fact, my personal walk with God does not function properly outside of my corporate walk with God, any more than a brick is a house by itself. A brick is definitely part of a house and each one serves an important role. But if bricks think of the house as something that serves their personal needs as bricks, they are just a tad egotistical.

It is not only a place that assists me in my walk with Christ, but it is a place where my participation, or lack thereof, will directly affect my spiritual health, and that of others.

I think that this is shocking to most people. In fact it is scary. It is scary because it starts to sound like cults and sects. It sounds controlling.

The sad thing is that cults and sects often do a better job of true community than the church does. The problem is not the closeness, it is the mind-control, the abusive leadership, the twisted and perverted doctrine. So we see closeness and community in weird groups, and conclude that sane, normal Christians live superficially connected to the church, which keeps servicing their spiritual needs.

Why is this corporate identity so important? Why does God stress it again, and again? Pick up any New Testament book and you will find a call to Christian unity. Here in Colossians, this section is dealing with unity. Why is it important to God?

### **1. The kind of spiritual unity believers are to have reveals God to the world.**

Let us look at some passages where there are parallels.

**1 Corinthians 12:4-6** *There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. <sup>5</sup> There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. <sup>6</sup> And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all.*

**Ephesians 4:4-6** *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; <sup>5</sup> one*

*Lord, one faith, one baptism; <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.*

The fact that differences are being transcended is a testament to the sufficiency of Christ - 'all in all'.

**John 17:20-23** *I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; <sup>21</sup> "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. <sup>22</sup> "And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: <sup>23</sup> "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.*

In these passages, it is clear – God is comparing the unity to believers to the unity He has in Himself. God is three Persons. Three Personalities exist in the Godhead. They are distinct persons. And yet, they are one God. God is a unity – He is One God. But God is actually three Persons. Now believers are separate persons. We are all individual personalities. But together we make up one Body. There are not three gods, there is one God. There are not millions of bodies of Christ. There is one body.

The kind of unity God wants from us is a living portrayal of the mystery of the Godhead. There is more to witnessing than your personal testimony. There is our corporate testimony.

**John 13:35** *"By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."*

## **2. Second, this kind of unity is necessary for God to reveal Himself further to us.**

I agree with Tozer here. The Spirit of God certainly aids us to achieve unity, but He comes in power and produces revival when there is already unity. Unity brings revival. Remember Acts 2. Before the Spirit came, what does the Bible say of those disciples? They were together and were of one accord.

So we understand the importance of it. But what exactly is it? What does it look like? Is unity being on speaking terms with everyone in church? Is it a nice cordial handshake?

### **i. It is a profound oneness of mind and purpose.**

**Philippians 2:1-4** *Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, <sup>2</sup> fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.*

**Acts 4:32** *Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul;*

**Romans 12:16** *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.*

**Romans 15:5-6** *Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

**2 Corinthians 13:11** *Finally, brethren, farewell. Become complete. Be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.*

**1 Peter 3:8** *Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be*

*tenderhearted, be courteous;*

What does one-mindedness mean? It is personalities in harmony. Like clocks that have been synchronised, like pianos that have been tuned; it is when our loves, desires, goal, ambitions, attitudes, ideas are synchronised. That does not mean we lose our personalities or our ability to think critically. It means the Word of God increasingly tunes our minds to the same frequency.

How do you get people who are so different in so many respects to be of one mind?  
It comes by spending much time together, poring over God's Word as we all submit to it.

It is inevitable that people who spend more time together are able to be of one mind, because there is more time to interact. It is inevitable, people who agree to submit their individual wills and views to one perfect authority are able to be of one mind.

When believers commonly submit to the Word of God, and spend much time together, under God's Word, they will come to a corporate unity of mind. It takes hours and hours of learning, teaching, disagreeing, discussing.

If servicing your own Christian life is all you are concerned about – it's fine to pop your head in the door, fill your tank with a sermon and go out again. But if you understand and submit to God's plan for the church, you will want to develop one-mindedness with the believers in your church. You will want to be with them as often as is possible, to get the minds synchronised.

That's what I think is behind a lot of people's attendance habits. They think only in terms of 'getting a sermon for myself'. They do not think in terms of growing in unity of mind with a body, experiencing the Word together, whenever it is shared, asking questions, discussing, learning; until a deep and rooted oneness of mind develops.

When you have oneness of mind, you are going to have oneness of purpose. You will now desire the same things. There is now a corporate desire for Christ's manifest presence in our services, a corporate desire for the conversion of lost souls, a corporate desire for missions, a corporate desire for Spirit-empowered preaching, and a corporate desire for a building.

It is a fact in the Old Testament, that God blessed and judged people in groups. Sometimes, it is not enough to have one or two praying for revival and illumination, and expect God to come and bless it. Because, if one or two or three out of 150, are asking God for something, then overwhelmingly, that thing is not what that church wants. If three men come to prayer meeting, then overwhelmingly, the men, the spiritual leaders of the church say, 'We do not need to ask you, God.' When we have common purposes, common desires, it must bubble up into corporate prayer.

It turns into corporate actions towards ministries amongst us, and outside us; oneness of mind and purpose. It is something the Spirit produces, but He produces it when God's people present themselves corporately before the Word to be synchronized, to be tuned, to be harmonised into a group of one mind.

This is unique to Christianity. You can get uniformity of mind by forcing people. You can get uniformity of mind by brainwashing people. But only when God's children sit obediently under His Word, does He produce a supernatural unity of mind.

## **ii. It is a unselfish loyalty to Christ and each other.**

**Philippians 2:3** *Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.*

Loyalty is not something an intensely selfish person can do. To be loyal – whether it is to a wife or husband, to children or parents, to an army, to a country, to a cause, means you must put the interests of another ahead of your own.

Loyalty means we place our personal wishes behind the glory of Christ and the needs of His body. Unity comes when loyalty to Christ and His glory becomes our common purpose, and we see to it that the others amongst us naming Christ do the same.

The kind of unity God expects means we understand our interconnectedness. That means, when one member suffers, the others suffer with it. When one does well, so do the others. Your spiritual temperature affects mine. Mine affects yours. Sin in your life is not just your problem. Because you are part of a body, it becomes our problem too. Therefore, a true unity involves ministry to one another - giving it, receiving it; encouraging one another; sharing with one another; praying for one another; showing mercy to one another; comforting one another; rebuking one another; warning one another; teaching one another; disciplining one another; disciplining one another.

As believers who belong to each other, we are to serve each other, because we are not separate Christians coming for a weekly pep talk. We are organs in a Body, and your spiritual health is my priority, and my spiritual health is your priority.

Unselfish loyalty means I put other believers ahead of my own comfort, or desires. I might prefer to say nothing to that brother going astray. But unselfish loyalty to Christ, and to him, means I will step out of my comfort zone and rebuke him. I might prefer to lounge on the couch with a book on Wednesday night, but loyalty to other believers means I will be at one of the home groups to encourage others and learn myself. I might prefer to avoid prayer meetings because I find them hard, or I can't concentrate, but unselfish loyalty means I go to learn and grow. I might prefer to speak to the ones I am familiar with because I like them and they like me. Unselfish loyalty to Christ and His Body means I leave my comfort zone and reach out to people I might not usually speak to. I might prefer to avoid giving when we've had a tough month financially and everything has broken. Unselfish loyalty to Christ gives in faith.

Unselfish loyalty is like a patriotic soldier. A patriotic soldier says 'This war, this country, is bigger and more important than my personal wishes, comforts or desires. I belong to something more important than just my own wishes. I am willing to sacrifice for it.'

True unity involves this kind of loyalty. Loyalty means we are under authority and are accountable. Loyalty means we place our personal wishes behind the glory of Christ and the needs of His body. Loyalty means we serve and meet needs instead of consuming and expecting to be served.

Once again, try to imagine how unselfish loyalty to Christ and one another can possibly grow if we pass each other like ships in the night on a Sunday morning. That is not what God is commanding in Scripture. He is not calling for a superficial friendliness. He is commanding, not recommending, a radical interconnectedness in which each member looks out for the interests of the others.

But I fear that the plain truth is there are some Christians who simply do not want this kind of unity. Oh, they don't want to be divisive necessarily, but they would prefer to have a private, individualised Christianity, with some church thrown in. They don't really care to develop one-mindedness with other people, particularly people of other cultures or backgrounds. And they are not very keen on this idea of loyalty to one another where others hold me accountable, and I become responsible to serve others. That just seems like interference. It seems like more commitments, when I am already over-committed.

Sad to say, many modern churches, so as to keep building facilities, and keep paying salaries are

quite happy to cater to this lack of unity. They are happy to have thousands of people under one roof, who have only the faintest unity around the Word - people who wouldn't recognise each other on any day of the week; People who slip in to church, slip out, get their inspiration for the week, and go. They are even happy to have different services for different tastes – traditional at 8am, contemporary and 10am, youth service at 6pm. We can't agree on what it means to worship God anymore, so let's split up, and we'll cater to the various 'tastes'.

Here is the thing. This kind of unity which we have spoken about is part of what God has saved you to. As much as you live in an individualised world, God doesn't do individualised Christianity. You cannot live it successfully. This just isn't part of the options God gives you. And in fact, as much as you mean no harm, you cannot live disconnected from other believers without in some way harming them – denying them the gifts God has given you.

I know it seems strange and intimidating and odd. As I said at the beginning, it is like a culture shock, but wisdom is justified of her children. When you submit wholeheartedly to real community of believers, real oneness, real loyalty to Christ and one another, it makes perfect sense. It feels quite natural. It begins to be something you can never live without again. You want it. You miss it when it is gone. You crave it.

So, if you are still on the periphery, don't stay there. Don't rob yourself, don't rob your church. Attend whenever the church meet and become of one mind as you search the Scriptures together.

Second, let me make this call. I have often said, 'You are as spiritual as you want to be.' That is true of whole churches as well. We are as spiritual as we want to be corporately. Our desire for God and His Word and His purposes are seen on our worship services, our goals as a church, are seen at our prayer meetings. God does not enjoy withholding blessing, but He will not give a corporate blessing to a minority in the church, if the majority are not interested.