

Church Unity

By Pastor Kelly Sensenig

Along the western coast of Ireland, fishermen use a round-bottom craft known as a currach. This boat has a tarred canvas over a wooden frame. Because of its unique construction, it is vulnerable to sharp rocks or floating objects, and it requires the oarsmen to cooperate completely, rowing in perfect unison. Out of this need for unity has come the Irish expression "You will have to pull with the crew." Or, as another Irish proverb states, "There is no strength without unity." What is true for Irish fishermen is especially true for believers in Jesus Christ as they seek to work harmoniously together at the local church level.

Many times we hear about churches coming together for some kind of mammoth ecumenical gathering where doctrine is disregarded and where those churches that are liberal are included in the huge rally. This is termed as Christian unity. However, we must understand there can be no unity without the strict adherence to doctrine (Eph. 4:13). Furthermore, Paul did not write about the subject of unity to promote the modern ecumenical movement that would one day come into existence. It's almost silly to think that this was even in Paul's mind when he wrote about unity. Of course, Paul wrote about the importance of practicing unity on the local church level where the saints were expected to dwell together as His people (Eph. 4:1-6). Paul writes about unity so that the local church would practice it in their gathered or stated meetings.

It seems that many fundamental churches today are not practicing this unity since we see so many insignificant dogfights and silly problems erupting in even the local fundamentalist church. A pastor came home one day to find his daughter arguing with her friends in the bedroom. From the front hallway he could hear them yelling and calling each other names, so he quickly made his way up the stairs. "What's going on in here?" he asked as he entered the room. "His five-year-old looked up at him and smiled. "It's okay, Daddy. We're just playing church!"

There are many churches and some people in churches today who thrive on disunity. They are always looking around the corner for some kind of issue to flare up so that they can engage in war. They major on trying to find what they consider to be problems and then exploit them to the nth degree. This seems to be some kind of game for them. They travel from church to church to try and find and expose some alleged problem and then become involved in the heat of the battle.

1 Timothy 5:13 reveals what we don't want in the church.

“And withal they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house; and not only idle, but tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not.”

These kinds of people are not interested in church unity. Rather, they thrive on disunity. They are out to divide church ministries with their gossip and many times false conclusions or skewed thinking regarding a fundamental local church. Then there are those in church ministries who begin to sit, soak, and sour about certain people and over particular things taking place in the church. Eventually their negative spirit is felt in the assembly and they begin to quench the Spirit's working and divide the saints because of their wrong attitudes, misunderstood conclusions about God's work and people, and their lack of love and consideration for God's servants. This is a very real problem among many churches today.

1 Timothy 3:15 reveals what we do want and need in church ministry.

“But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.”

God's people must learn how to behave in God's house by stop causing unwarranted division. The saints on the local level must get back to practicing Biblical church unity. Of course, unity does not mean we must brush sin and wrong doctrine under the carpet. It does not mean that we must ignore compromise in the local church (Eph. 5:11; 1 Thess. 5:21). We can't be truly unified when false doctrine and compromise is taking place in the church since true unity is based upon the truth and doing what is right (Eph. 4:13; 2 John 1-2). However, in any fundamental church we must learn to

accept each other as being different in some ways and dwell together with each other in humility, tenderness, and patience. This is very important to understand.

While visiting in the home of a friend, a man watched several purple grackles feeding in the yard. These birds were truly beautiful, with their heads and necks a metallic violet-green and their black bodies accented by glossy colors. As he studied them more closely, he noticed that in the middle of the flock was a bird with only one leg. Apparently a trap or an accident had left it maimed. The markings on its head and chest told him it was not exactly like the others. Yet as he looked through the binoculars, he observed that it was not being excluded from the meal on that lawn. None of the other birds pushed it aside or refused to let it eat. Though it was somewhat different from the rest, it belonged to the same family and was welcome in the group.

The same should be true in the church congregation. Even though we are not all alike in the way we part our hair, or in every decision we make which revolves around daily routine and living, we still must remember that we are part of the family of God. In ministry we can never expect to agree on every little detail but we can learn to agree on what is most important, that which is honest, upon doctrine and the basic Bible tenants of separation and Christian living, and the need to follow a church pastor or leader for unified church ministry.

John Ashbrook said:

"In any fellowship of fundamental men there will be differences of opinion. Separation does not standardize all decisions."

God never intended that we must agree on matters of minor importance. It is enough to agree on the basics of Bible doctrine and separation. There must be unity in truth and overall practice of holy living as we come together and worship as God's people. For the sake of church ministry we must learn to agree on the main things and keep rowing in the same direction while accepting the minor personality differences in one another, the insignificant preferences that some people have over others, and some trivial traits or characteristics that a person has which are different than our own.

You know, it would be rather boring if we were all alike. Could you imagine if everyone would be like you! That is a scary thought!

In this study we want to investigate several Bible passages in both New and Old Testaments that deal with the subject of local church unity. We want to compare Scripture with Scripture so that we can arrive at some important conclusions regarding this teaching of church unity on a local church level.

It's the job of the pastor to teach the truth of the Word of God (Acts 6:4; 1 Thess. 2:13) so that the Holy Spirit can mold people together (Eph. 4:3) in accordance with what the Bible says about doctrine, Basic Bible separation, holy living, and fruitful living that reflects the work of the Holy Spirit operating in the lives of people. Ultimately it's the Holy Spirit that brings people together and unifies them through the Word of God and His work of transformation in their hearts and lives.

A. New Testament examples of unity.

There are a cluster of Bible verses that portray God's mind on the subject of church unity. Paul when speaking to the Corinthians presents the importance of church unity among the saints. This is because there was disunity among them due to personalities. This by the way is often the reason for disunity in the local churches today.

1 Corinthians 1:11 says:

“For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you.”

Some have accused this house of gossip. However, this is not the case at all. The house of Chloe was not gossiping to Paul but bringing to light a problem that needed to be addressed in order to resolve a divisive issue in the church. Where there is only silence a storm begins to brew. So it's better to bring things out into the open and deal with them clearly and up front. You must get the rabbit out of the hat before anything is going to be solved.

1 Corinthians 3:3-4 further describes this disunity:

“For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?”

Quarrels had split the congregation into factions. This can easily happen when the saints are not guided by the Holy Spirit and reminded by the Pastor of the unity they are to have together as God’s saints. There was senseless petty fighting going on and division that existed among the saints over personalities. Some claimed to be following Apollos, others Paul, and there was even a group that claimed they were exclusively following Christ over the rest of the saints. This caused envy, strife, and great division among the believers. The “personality cults” are still with us today and they can run ramped in the church causing division among the saints. This kind of division is in direct disobedience to the Word of God. They divide a church quicker than a knife can cut butter. So Paul has to write to the Corinthians to bring them together once again in the spirit of Christian unity. Paul knew all too well that a church divided against itself cannot stand. It becomes weak and sickly. So there was a need to stress unity among the saints.

In 1 Corinthians 1:10 Paul writes:

“Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”

Paul desired a working unity among the saints, much like a quilt of various colors and patterns, which are blended together in a harmonious whole.

Paul addresses several kinds of people in 1 Corinthians 1:10.

1. The speakers – “ye all speak the same thing”

To speak the same thing means that when they speak they were to say the same thing since they possessed the same mind about spiritual matters. He wanted them to take the same view on spiritual

things and experience unanimity in their judgment of what God expected of their personal lives regarding the situation at hand. They must agree to obey God's Word and do what Christ says if the problem of disunity is going to be fixed.

The only way any church can become unified is to place themselves under the authority of God's Word and become obedient to what God tells them to do. There can be no unity without possessing the same unified mind about God's Word. This is why Paul reinforces his statement with the words "same mind" and "same judgment" later in the verse. Once again the Corinthians were expected to share the same thinking and judgment about how God's Word instructs them to live and what they needed to do to stay unified in the assembly life. God's Word would give them the answer and direction they needed. It always does.

2. The dividers – “no divisions among you”

Paul knew all too well that there are always professional dividers in church ministries. Titus 3:10 calls them a "heretick" meaning divider or schismatic person who wrecks church ministries by creating internal strife through either false doctrine or some other divisive measure such as gossip, criticism, hatred, or bitterness. There are different types of heretics. They come in different styles, sizes, and flavors. One thing is certain. Even when a church wants to do what is right there will always be "saint critic" who claims to be spiritual while at the same time causing division and detriment to God's work. God does not want us to become critical of church ministry and life. Yes, we must be discerning, expose error, and stand up for what is right (Eph. 5:11). However, it's quite another thing to become soured and divisive in a church ministry because of bitterness and start backbiting and bashing away at leaders and the church ministry as a whole.

3. The menders - “that ye perfectly joined together”

Once again Paul wanted the people to think alike on what God commands them to do so that the church can through Spirit-filled people become mended together once again. The words "perfectly joined together" (1 Cor. 1:10) are one word in the Greek language

which speaks of mending or fixing something. The Greeks used this word for the setting of broken bones. In the New Testament the word was used for mending of fishing nets (Matt. 4:21). God needs menders in the church today – not dividers. Those who seek to restore ministry to a place of loving unity and oneness are those who seek to mend the ministry and bring back healing. Every church needs members who are menders today. Are you a mender or a divider? Are you a soothing ointment to ministry or a schismatic? These are very valid questions that only you can answer and demonstrate by your commitment to the local church level.

Let's be very open and honest. Satan wants to divide us but God wants to unite us. If we are willing to place ourselves under God's authority and possess the same mind regarding God's Word, then we can work together in unity without factions and divisions, which often stem from misunderstandings, misinformation, and misguided loyalties. In other words, when people want to become more loyal to the things of the world than to church ministry and life, they often find reason to attack the church in order to appease their lifestyle of leniency and love for the world.

During a hike through the woods, a troop of Boy Scouts came upon a short stretch of abandoned railroad track. One by one they each tried to walk the rails from one end to the other, but every one of them lost his balance and fell off. Suddenly, two of the boys, after considerable whispering, bet that they could both walk to the end of the rails without falling. The others laughed and challenged them to prove it. The two got on the track, one on each rail, grasped each other's hand, and started walking. This time they had no trouble keeping their balance and managed to walk the entire length of the track without falling. The spiritual truth is this. When we join hands together and become a mender instead of a divider there is no limit to what God can do in our fundamental churches.

Philippians 1:27

“Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.”

What an important reminder this is for each one of us today. The word “conversation” has the idea of behaving as a citizen. The Christian is a citizen of Heaven and therefore should live and behave like a heavenly citizen instead of like the unsaved crowd who only has an earthly citizenship. Think of this. We should be unified in our church ministry since we are citizens of Heaven. Heavenly citizens don’t fight and fume against one another. They are not divided into groups, factions, and personality zones.

As a citizen of Heaven we are to live in a manner that “becometh the gospel of Christ” which means that we are to live in a way that is becoming to a Christian that has been saved by the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Col. 1:10 – “walk worthy of the Lord”). Believers are to have integrity (uncompromising allegiance to moral and ethical principles) and live in a manner that demonstrates they have been saved by the glorious Gospel. The way we live outside the church and the way we live inside the church, expressing loving unity toward one another, should demonstrate that we have been saved by the Gospel or that our lives have been transformed because of it. When we live in a manner worthy of the Gospel we are living a transformed life that is pleasing to God.

“You are writing a Gospel,
A chapter each day,
By the deeds that you do
And the words that you say.
Men read what you write,
Whether faithful or true:
Just what is the Gospel
According to you?”

In Philippians 1:27 we discover three truths related to church unity.

1. We are one in spirit.

When Paul says we are to “stand fast in one spirit” (Phil. 1:27a) he means that we are to stand together possessing one goal or purpose within our human spirit. The human spirit is the place of decision (1 Cor. 2:10-12). We must decide to have a common purpose which is

to live together in unity and truth. Many churches are no longer standing together in these last days when they need each other.

The fact that we must “stand fast” indicates that we are in a battle against the devil. As someone once said, “The Christian life is not a playground but a battle ground.” There is a war going on and we had better remember this and get together in the ministry today. We need to keep a united front or else the devil will divide us and eventually destroy us! Dearly beloved, we must get our act together and get together by possessing the common goal to be unified in the truth and in our church work today. When we “stand fast in one spirit” we have decided to put away our petty differences and come together as a group of believers who are unified in the truth, their church life, and also in their daily living. To be at odds with one another is the death knell of any church. It quenches the Spirit’s work (1 Thess. 5:19). We must have the same spirit or same purpose to live above the devil’s allurements which seek to divide us and live in unity as citizens of Heaven. After all, we are the citizens of Heaven (Phil. 3:20).

As a general rule, there needs to be a unified spirit in doctrinal teaching and the application of Bible doctrine to our lives, including the doctrine of Bible separation. There also needs to be a common purpose to live right, do right, and stay right in connection with church ministry and life.

We must stand fast in one spirit. This means we should make our decision to stay on course, do the right thing, and remain unified in the battle. We should have the common goal to keep God’s people unified and serving together in unity. This will not happen when we are talking behind the pastor’s back, or when we gossip about other people and church ministry. It won’t happen when we attempt to do our own little thing or go our own little way which is opposite of the rest of the body. Dearly beloved, we must be determined to maintain the unity of the saints and keep our ducks in a row.

Before Andrew Jackson became the seventh president of the United States of America, he served as a major-general in the Tennessee militia. During the War of 1812 his troops reached an all-time low in morale. A critical spirit grew among them. They argued, bickered, and fought among themselves. It is reported that Old Hickory called them

all together on one occasion when tensions were at their worst and told them while pointing in the direction of their opponent: “Gentlemen! Let’s remember, the enemy is over there!”

We are in a battle. We don’t have time to be going round and round in circles like a dog chasing its tail. There is work to be done, there are victories to be won, and His truth must still go marching on! We must stand together or “stand fast in one spirit” and head for the front lines, get into the trenches, and fight. This is a call to arms. We must stand against the enemy and the only way we can do it is united.

Jesus said in Mark 3:25:

“And if a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand.”

“Now this is the law of the jungle
As old and as true as the sky;
And the wolf that keeps it may prosper,
And the wolf that shall break it must die.
As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk,
The law runneth forward and back –
And the strength of the pack is the wolf,
And the strength of the wolf is the pack.”

Friend, we must stand together in the truth and heed what God tells us to do if we are going to remain united in the battle. A house divided against itself cannot stand. Or course, the level of true Biblical unity in any church is measured by adherence to truth and righteousness (Eph. 4:13; 2 John 1-4). It is not measured simply by experience or feeling. However, feeling and emotion do enter into the picture.

2. We are one in soul.

The word “mind” (Phil. 1:27b) actually translates “soul” (psuche). The soul of a person is the place of desire and emotion – the real personality of a person. It reflects the real person. Paul says that we are to have “one mind” or “one soul” which means we are to be united together in our ministry by pouring our entire being or soul into keeping the ministry pure and free from division and disunity. The fellowship of the saints is to be so important to us that we should be

willing to pour our entire soul into striving for unity and sweet fellowship among God's saints. In other words, we should give it everything we got! We need to put our entire soul or being into making a ministry unified.

Many times Christians don't view ministry in this way. They simply look at the church as the Sunday morning meeting place and have no strong desire to revolve their lives around church ministry and keeping it pure, united, and moving in a separated and fruitful direction. Many times we care about everything else but keeping unity and fellowship in the church. We have gotten our wires crossed somewhere along the way. God wants us remember how important it is to have a unified ministry that stands together in truth and practice. To achieve this goal we must be of "one soul" or together pour our emotional energies, affections, and desires into the work of the Lord. In short, we must give of ourselves totally and unreservedly to God's work striving to keep the unity of the saints and rowing in the same direction.

God is looking for your heart today. He is looking for your soul. He wants you. When you mean business with God you will put your heart and soul into serving Him, doing what is right, and keeping the unity of the saints.

Mark 12:30

"And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment."

The Lord may see your church attendance but more importantly He wants to see your soul operating in church ministry and life. God may have your wallet, but more importantly, He wants your soul! We must strive together, pouring everything we have into ministry today (our entire souls), in order to keep it moving forward and unified. We must possess victory over the old nature, put aside our petty differences, follow church leadership, and pour our energies and affections into church ministry striving together for unity and fellowship among the saints. Some Christians simply don't care about God's work. They are too busy living their own lives independent of God and the local church ministry. When they come to church they are only attendees

but not soul partners in God's work and ministry. Let me just say that a soul partner in ministry does not seek to divide God's people.

A soul partner in the work of the Lord will do everything and anything he can to keep the fellowship of the saints. They will not become sour, divisive, and disrupt the fellowship and unity of God's people over their own personal ideas, agendas, and goals. They will come to God's House and fellowship with God's people with a determination that they are going to be part of the answer to unity and the church moving forward. This is what it means to pour your soul into ministry. It takes determination and fortitude to do what is right and honoring to God.

“I am determined, I will be faithful
Till He has finished His purpose in me
And nothing shall shake me
For He'll never forsake me
I am determined to live for the King.”

3. We are one in faith.

The idea of the expression “one in faith” speaks of the place that truth has in our hearts and lives. We are to strive together in the truth. When Paul says “striving together” (Phil. 1:27c) he is using an athletic term. It speaks of being involved in a contest. The idea being portrayed is a group of athletes coming together and cooperating as a team. The picture is of athletes coming together to come against an opposing team. Of course, the team that we are opposing is Satan's team. The contest calls for pulling together and teamwork. Unity assures of added strength. Therefore, we must unite and move forward in victory. There is no other way to win the battle. Satan's strategy has always been to divide and conquer. Therefore, victory can only be achieved as believers work together effectively as a team carrying out the will of God.

Today we must strive together in the work today that God has called us to. In many church congregations today the saints are not striving together. Instead, they are bickering or fighting together. It may be that some of you need to get on the team. You have been negligent and shunning your duties. In these last days of compromise we need to unite together in doctrine and duty, get behind a fundamental

pastor, stop trying to find loopholes in a good ministry, and move forward in church life and work. There is no time to waste.

Romans 13:12

“The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light.”

The specific church task is to strive together as a team promoting what Paul calls “the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27c). The expression “the faith” speaks of what all Christians believe. It is the proclamation and preservation of truth or the historic Christian faith. If there is anything we must be united in it’s the spread of truth. The body of truth that Christians embrace has its center or circumference in “the gospel” message of Jesus Christ. It is this specific message that we must preserve and propagate as a unified people. My friend, if there is anything that takes team work it’s sharing the Gospel message to a world of lost sinners. The Word of God is telling us that we must strive together in unity proclaiming this wonderful message of the Gospel to a world that is going to hell.

We must be united in the common cause of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of sins and not allow disunity to strangle this proclamation. Let me ask you something. Are you part of the Gospel team? Are you sharing Christ with others? Are you striving together with those saints who are taking the message to others? How many people have we witnessed to this week? How many Gospel tracts have handed out? We should hang our heads in shame most of the time. We have got to get together in evangelism today. Souls are in danger of going to hell. The point is this. We have so many golden opportunities to share Christ with others that we have no time to deal with church problems that are caused by Christians, who split the church over nonessentials, or their little petty differences and personal preferences. When we must constantly tend to problems created by division we will begin to lose our effective Gospel witness. This is because we will spend all of our time trying to fix divisive problems in the church instead of proclaiming the Gospel message. Instead of dividing over minor things we need to unite on the major things which are doctrine and getting the Gospel out to a world that is lost in sin.

In a horse-pulling contest at a county fair the first-place horse moved a sled weighing 4,500 pounds. The runner-up pulled 4,000 pounds. The owners of the two horses wondered how much the animals could pull if they worked together. So they hitched them up and loaded the sled. To everyone's surprise, the horses were able to pull 12,000 pounds. Sometimes in the Lord's work we try to pull the weight of a job all by ourselves. However, when we team up with others we work with greater efficiency and can accomplish so much more. This is especially true in relationship to spreading the Gospel message. God has called us to strive together as a team spreading this wonderful message to a world of lost sinners.

When the fiftieth anniversary of the battle of Gettysburg rolled around in 1913, the few Civil War veterans who were still alive decided to stage a re-enactment of one part of that famous battle-- Pickett's charge. The Union veterans took their places among the rocks along the ridge, and the Confederate veterans began marching across the field toward them. Then an amazing thing happened. As the old men of the Union began to rush down the hillside toward their former enemies, a great shout went up. But instead of engaging in hand-to-hand combat as they had done a half-century before, they threw their arms around each other. They wept as they embraced one another. Dearly beloved, this should be our response to one another. Instead of fighting God has called us to unity and love in the Spirit. This is what our next verse teaches us.

Ephesians 4:1-3

"I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Have you ever seen a child who is learning to walk? Sometimes the child will reach up and take the hand of one of the parents. Still a little unsteady, the child reaches up again and takes the hand of the other parent. It almost looks as if the child is drawing the parents together. This is a wonderful way to illustrate what God expects from our lives as Christians in the local church assembly. He wants us to take the hands of one another and unite together in doctrine and duty.

In Ephesians 4:1-13 Paul once again shares some important thoughts on the subject of unity among the saints.

There are five truths related to unity in Ephesians 4:1-13.

1. The practice of unity (Eph. 4:1-2)

“I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love.”

When Paul talks about “the vocation” he is referring to the Christian invitation or call to salvation (Rom. 1:5-6; 1 Cor. 1:9) and also the Christian call to practice sanctification which is expressed by dwelling together with God’s saints in unity. This is what the call focuses on in these verses in Ephesians. These people needed to walk the talk. They are called upon to “walk worthy” or live in a way that outwardly demonstrated their calling in Christ. Paul is saying that a Christian’s character should be in keeping with his calling. In short, they were to live out the truth of their union with Christ. This is the great calling that we have as Christians. We have been called to be joint-heirs and partners with the life of Jesus Christ. In the first three chapters Paul spoke of theology and points to how we are united with Christ in heavenly places (Eph. 1:3; 2:5). Because I am in Christ in the *heavenlies* I share His victory and His virtues (life). But now he comes down to earth and says that our high and holy calling in the *heavenlies* is to manifest itself in church unity, ministry, and life. Doctrine now becomes duty!

Since we are joined to Christ’s life in heavenly places (share a new partnership with Christ’s life) we are to act like it in our daily conduct and life among the saints. Our position in Christ should be put into practice within the church through dedicated work, striving for unity, and being part of those things that are eternal. So Paul moves from our position in Christ in the first three chapters to the practical manifestation of this position in daily church life and living in chapter four.

Dr. McGee gave this illustration:

“Some people dwell on the first part of the epistle and become rather super-duper saints, very spiritual. I remember a family like this when I first came to Southern California. They attended the church which I pastored but were not members. They were lovely, active people. I asked them one day why they didn’t join the church. They looked up to the ceiling and said, ‘We’re members of the *invisible* church,’ and fluttered their eyelids. I have learned that a lot of these folk who are members of the ‘invisible’ church are *really* invisible—invisible on Sunday night and invisible on Wednesday night. In fact, they are invisible when you need help from them. Now, my friend, let’s be practical about this: the invisible church is to make itself visible down here in a local assembly.”

Paul is saying that those who have been called to partnership with Christ should live like it in their local churches. We are to be committed to service, unity, and being part of God’s ministry on earth. The way we express this unity is to manifest Christ’s life through us as we live out our union with Jesus Christ. So how can we practice unity among the saints? The answer is simple. We must allow Christ’s life to shine through us. In church ministry and life it is important to show a Christlike spirit. If we are going to be like Christ for all eternity we should start being like Him right now. The place to begin is at home, school, and in church.

The hymnist S. J. Stone wrote this about the church:

“With a scornful wonder
Men see her sore oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder,
By heresies distressed.”

How do we practice unity?

a. By demonstrating Christ’s humility (vs. 2).

Paul goes for the jugular vein right away by hitting us where we need it most. If we are ever going to get along we must humble ourselves before one another. The word “lowliness” points to the humility that we are to possess and express to others in our relationships within

the assembly. Humility means putting Christ first, others second, and self last. Humility involves building others up and speaking lowly of ourselves (Phil. 2:3).

George McDonald said:

“Lowliness makes us conscious of our own nothingness and enables us to esteem others better than ourselves. It is the opposite of conceit and arrogance.”

Humility also involves a spirit of surrender and submissiveness to others that is reflected in our actions and fellowship with the believers in the local church setting. It’s the type or person who chooses to remain an anonymous servant.

Andrew Murray said:

“Humility is that grace that, when you know you have it, you have lost it.”

There is no place for pride in God’s ministry. Pride not only goes before a fall (Prov. 16:18) but also before a church split. Pride lurks behind all discord and division. The ego wants to inflate its own significance and push its own agenda. The wonderful truth is this. When we practice humility we will be promoting unity. It’s as simple as this. We will not divide the saints by flexing our muscles but be willing to come together and meet on common ground and with understanding. The first jewel in the crown of Christian unity is the rare jewel of humility – humility in actions, attitudes, and adjustments related to church ministry.

b. By demonstrating Christ’s gentleness (vs. 2).

The word “meekness” speaks of possessing a gentle spirit. Jesus Christ was “meek and lowly in heart” (Matt. 11:29). If we are going to be like Him then we must express this grace to others in our local church setting. *Meekness does not mean weakness in doctrinal stance and convictions.* Rather, it means to possess a gentle spirit among the saints. In the Greek language this word was used for a soothing medicine, a colt that had been broken, and a soft wind. A gentle person has a soft touch and sweet spirit that is seen and experienced by others. A meek person is not domineering and

demanding. Meekness is the opposite of self-assertion, rudeness, and harshness. The word suggests a person who has one's emotions under control. When we practice meekness we will be promoting unity. We will not be schismatic but a soothing ointment to assembly life.

c. By demonstrating Christ's patience (vs. 2).

Paul uses the word "longsuffering" which means patience. Patience is the spirit which never gives up for it endures to the end even in times of adversity. Sometimes we must endure discomfort without fighting back. Being patient is the opposite of being short-tempered. The old nature is so quick to take offense that we need longer fuses today. God does not want us to be short tempered, quick tempered, or ill tempered, but long tempered! How long is your fuse?

We must learn to exhibit patience in assembly life because of the different personalities and particular stages or levels of spiritual growth that people are presently at in their Christian lives. Not all Christians are placed in the same mold and not all Christians are at the same spiritual level as others. Therefore, there is a need for patience and gracious tolerance among the brethren. God certainly is patient with us and yet we often do not exercise the same type of patience with others. We must learn to be patient or longsuffering when people get under our skin and learn to react in a restrained manner. When we learn the secret of being patient toward one another we can learn to get along without becoming divided or disjointed and possessing a revengeful spirit toward others. Most of us need a wee bit more patience!

James 1:4

"But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing."

One thing is certain. When we practice patience we will be promoting unity.

d. By demonstrating Christ's love (vs. 2).

Paul says that we should practice “forbearing one another in love.” When we “forbear” someone it means we endure and put up with them in spite of their differences. It means we make allowance for the faults and failures of others, or their differing personalities, preferences, and particular temperaments. We can do this as an expression of our “love” for people – “forbearing one another in love” (Eph. 4:2).

Colossians 3:13

“Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.”

This is a tolerant love. However, it is not speaking about maintaining some kind of facade or superficial front of courtesy, while we are inwardly seething with resentment toward people. It speaks of possessing a positive love to those who may irritate, disturb, or embarrass us at times. When we practice love we will put up with the differences in others and be promoting unity. Colossians 2:2 says we are to be “knit together in love” and learn to get along. Let us never forget this.

In one of the Peanuts cartoons Lucy said to Snoopy: “There are times when you really bug me but I must admit there are times when I feel like giving you a gig hug.” Snoopy replied: “That’s the way I am, Lucy. I’m huggable and I’m buggable!” Hugs and bugs! This is the way we must look at ministry and people who are different. Sometimes they seem huggable while others times they seem buggable. But for the sake of the Gospel, our testimony, our ministry, and our children we must learn to get along.

God wants us to practice unity by putting on Christ in an experiential way in assembly life (Rom. 13:14). When we live out the character of our calling we can be sure that we will be bringing unity and not division to church life and ministry. So what about you? Are you a divider or a mender? Are you pulling with ministry or pulling away from ministry?

2. The persistence of unity (Eph. 4:3).

“Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

The idea behind this expression (“endeavoring to keep”) means that a person must make every diligent effort to keep unity in the local assembly. Instead of working against the unity of church life and ministry, one must work hard to maintain unity, and be part of the answer. We must have the mindset and motive to promote unity and not disrupt it in the local church. Some Christians move from church to church always seeking to disrupt and divide God’s people. Instead of a uniter they are a divider.

An old saint once said to a young married couple: “It’s great that you love each other, but if you’re going to be happy in marriage, you gotta work at it!” This is the way it is with church unity. When we think the situation is the best, Satan will move in and try to wreck it. The spiritual unity of a home or a church is the responsibility of each person involved, and the job to maintain unity never ends.

3. The promoter of unity (Eph. 4:3)

The promoter of unity is “the Spirit.” In a positional sense, the Holy Spirit has already unified us together by His baptizing work. You will notice that the Bible text says we are “to keep the unity of the Spirit” – not make this unity. We can’t make the unity which the Holy Spirit has already accomplished for us. We can simply “keep” the unity the Holy Spirit has already created by working and serving together in ministry.

1 Corinthians 12:13 explains:

“For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.”

This verse speaks of the unity the Holy Spirit has already created by His baptizing ministry in forming the body of Christ – the Church. I once received a telephone call from a man who asked if we were a Spirit filled church. I asked him, “What do you mean by spirit filled.” He then replied, “Do you receive the baptism of the Holy Ghost in your church and get happy or drunk on the Holy Spirit.” I told him that we have all received the baptism of the Holy Spirit but it’s not in the way that you describe. The Bible says we have “all” been baptized by the Holy Spirit. Not one person is left out. This is because the baptism of the Holy Spirit does not involve some kind of post-salvation

experience where we get happy and speak in the alleged experience of tongues. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is His saving ministry which unites us to the life of Jesus Christ.

The word for “baptized” speaks of immersion. Do you realize that you were baptized or spiritually immersed in Jesus Christ? This truth points to how the Holy Spirit at the time of our salvation has brought each believer into a living union with Jesus Christ. Our spiritual union with Christ is comparable to a water baptism. When one is baptized in the proper way they are immersed and the water totally surrounds them. In a similar way, when we are brought into a spiritual union with Christ, we are totally immersed (spiritually baptized) in Jesus Christ. We are immersed or joined to Christ in such a way that His entire life becomes our life, His righteousness becomes our righteousness, His power becomes our power, and His victory over death, hell, and the grave becomes our victory.

I need the spiritual baptism before I get the water baptism. It's the Spirit's baptism that saves me and sanctifies me. When I was saved I was baptized in Jesus Christ. I was totally immersed in His death, burial, resurrection (Rom. 6:1-6) and ascension (Eph. 1:3; 20-23; 2:5) and today I sit in heavenly places in Christ sharing His victory over the devil and every demonic horde in the universe! I've been baptized into Christ! O what a salvation this! As a result of this baptism I have a spiritual union and togetherness with Christ. I have been brought into a spiritual union with Christ where Jesus Christ becomes everything to me and for me.

The Holy Spirit has immersed us in what is called the body of Christ (“For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body”). The spiritual union we share with Christ is likened to a body. The Church is called the body of Christ (Eph. 5:23) and this is the analogy that Paul speaks of in this verse. God's New Testament saints have been spiritually baptized together and this togetherness that we share is likened to a body over which Christ is head (Eph. 1:22; 5:23). The analogy is that together we share Christ's life in a body which is called the Church over which He ultimately rules and gives leadership.

The practical point is this. Since every one of us are sharing Christ's life in this body we should function and work together on a local church level. We should allow Christ to work through us and be united as a human body is united and works together. In short, Christians must preserve the unity between believers that the Holy Spirit has already created in the church by His baptizing work. He has welded us together in one body and now we should function together as a human body functions and works together. In the human body the hand works with the feet and the ears work with the eyes. The human body functions together and is unified in what it does. The same should be true about the local church. Every member in the human body works together and stays in unison. Paul uses the body analogy elsewhere.

1 Corinthians 12:14-22

“For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet but one body. And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary.”

The Holy Spirit has baptized us in the body of Christ and has created a unity which is described as Christ's body. This means we can function together on the local church level in harmony because of the unity that the Spirit has created. The body analogy reminds us that we are important in the body of Christ. I have never seen just an eye walking down the street all alone. I have never seen an ear walking down the street all alone. I have never seen a nose walking down the street alone. Why? It's because the human body never functions independently. All the parts of the body function and work together. In fact. Those members of the human body “which seem to be more feeble, are necessary” (1 Cor. 12:22).

You may think the little toe or finger on the human body is not that important until you try and live without one of them. These little members of the human body are very important for balance and gripping things. The same is true regarding everyone in the local church. We are all needed and important. A person with the gift of mercy is a great asset to any church ministry. They will take the time to reach out to others in a special way and write letters to people to encourage them. Those who have the gift of helps work behind the scenes in many ways but they are used greatly in the work of the Lord and are of vital importance.

The point is this. We are all important. The human body works together as a team and we must also realize that everyone has an important role or part in the body of Christ. Therefore, we need to work and function together like a human body does. We must work together as a team fulfilling the roles that we can do in this body life or body relationship.

After D-Day in World War II, someone said to General Eisenhower, "It's great how you were able to coordinate all the teams in that great enterprise." The General quickly corrected him: "Not teams," he said, "but team." This is the way it's to be within local church life and ministry. We are to be one team serving together and building one another up in our Christian lives.

The truth is this. We can all serve together since we all have a gift given to us by God (1 Pet. 4:10). I have people tell me, "I can't do very much. I'm really not that good at anything." This simply is not true. We all have our niche and gift and can be used in an important way in the body of Christ. The question is this. Are you willing to be part of the body? Are you willing to be used so that the body can function together more effectively? When one member is not functioning it makes it harder on the rest of the body.

This is true in relationship to the human body. If your foot is sore it makes everything else work harder. You must put more weight on the other foot or use crutches to get around. This puts more strain on the arms and back. It seems when one member of the human body is not functioning properly the rest of the body must compensate in strange ways making it harder on the body to function as it should. The same

is true in the local church body. When we don't function together by using our gifts and being part of the body analogy, it makes it harder for the rest of the body to function.

Dear friend, we are part of the body of Christ and this should translate into unity on the local church level. This is what Paul is teaching in the epistles. We are to function together as a body by realizing the value and importance of each member of the body.

1 Corinthians 12:23-24

“And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked.”

Some members of the human body are not seen and don't outwardly display themselves like the arms, eyes, or legs. The kidneys, for instance, don't seem to be as important as the arms. But the kidneys are very important since we cannot function without them. The same is true about the heart, lungs, liver, or brain. These vital organs never put themselves on public display but without them the body dies. The same is true about those within the church body that are praying behind the scenes and serving in ways that go unnoticed. These people are extremely important for without them the body would not function. We are all important and should not cherry pick which gifts are more important than others and which members are more important than others. We are all important just as every member of the human body is important.

When realizing this body life principle we will express our thanks, gratitude, love, and care for each member of the local church body so “that there should be no schism in the body” (1 Cor. 12:25). In short, we will build each other up, recognize that every member in the body is important, and encourage one another to serve in the capacity that God has called them serve. We will bestow honor on those who are working behind the scenes and doing great things in the ministry and work of the Lord by using the less-spectacular gifts. We will not try and honor ourselves, blow ourselves up, but encourage one another to use their gifts that the Lord has given to them. This kind of loving

humility will bring unity instead of dissension in any church ministry (“that there should be no schism in the body”).

The point is this. Since the Holy Spirit has already united us together as the body of Christ we should work together and keep the unity that we already have in the body of Christ. The “unity of the Spirit” that Paul talked about in Ephesians 4:3 speaks of how we share the life of Christ together, through the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit, and how this togetherness in the body of Christ should be seen in serving together, sacrificing together, sticking together, and stepping out together in evangelism. We are commanded to “keep” this unity that we already have and possess in Christ, through the Spirit’s baptism, by treating one another with importance, kindness, love, and by working together in ministry.

In a practical sense, the Holy Spirit also promotes fruit in our lives, so we can manifest love, patience, and longsuffering toward the brethren. The “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22–23) will help maintain the “unity of the Spirit” (Eph. 4:3). As believers “walk in the Spirit” (Gal. 5:16) they can function and work together. Our unity is based upon what the Holy Spirit has done for us (bringing us together in the body) and how He is working through us today (bringing us to Christlikeness – 2 Cor. 3:18). As we respond to the body life ministry, which the Holy Spirit has created, and as we respond to the inner life ministry of the Spirit’s transformation in our hearts, we will be a church member that seeks to unify God’s work, instead of tearing it apart with unloving attitudes, actions, and adverse reactions to leadership decisions and directives. Listen, we must stick together today or else we become a pawn in the devil’s hand.

Two men were riding a bicycle built for two when they came to a big steep hill. It took a great deal of struggle for the men to complete what proved to be a very stiff climb. When they got to the top the man in front turned to the other and said, "Boy, that sure was a hard climb." The fellow in back replied, "Yes, and if I hadn't kept the brakes on all the way we would certainly have rolled down backwards." Let us be careful that we are not putting on the brakes in church life and ministry. When we put the brakes on through divisive attitudes and actions we are holding back and keeping God’s richest blessing from

coming into a church ministry. God wants us to get off the brakes and ride up the hill together and experience His rich blessing today.

4. The peace of unity (Eph. 4:4)

In Ephesians 4:4 Paul goes on to speak about the “bond of peace” that we experience when we unite and serve together in ministry. Peace is the result when the Holy Spirit unites us. Instead of allowing the devil to divide us, the Spirit unites us, and we experience a blessed peace in church ministry and life. Some churches thrive on disunity. The hallowed halls of the church have become the heckling halls. The fellowship of the saints has turned into the gossiping of the saints. We cannot do these things and have the bond or peace.

William McDonald said:

“There is enough of the flesh in every one of us to wreck any local church or any other work of God. Therefore, we must submerge our own petty, personal whims and attitudes, and work together in peace for the glory of God and for common blessing.”

Of course, this is not peace at any price. To unite with liberal Protestantism and Roman Catholicism in ecumenical outreach is not the bond of peace that Paul is talking about (2 Cor. 6:14-17). This is not the bond of peace but a broken peace! Paul is referring to peace that comes to local assemblies when the Holy Spirit guides believers in truth (John 16:13) and unites them together under the umbrella of doctrine, brotherly kindness, and the Christian graces of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). This is when true peace is achieved. The church is not intended to be a war zone among the saints but a place of refuge. The church is to be a sickroom for suffering saints and not a sideline of shouting antagonists that are divided and against one another.

5. The picture of unity (Eph. 4:4-6).

Paul now gives several illustrations or pictures of the unity we already share. He does this by bringing out our oneness of the body of Christ and our mutual relationship to God. What are the mutual things we share together as Christians?

Ephesians 4:4-6

“There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are 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.”

- The body picture. We are united in the “one body.” This is the picture of the universal Church (Col. 1:18).
- The Spirit picture. We are united in “one Spirit.” This is the Holy Spirit who indwells the Church and promotes unity among the brethren (Eph. 2:22).
- The heavenly picture. We are united in “one hope of your calling.” This is the heavenly hope that all believers possess in Christ (Eph. 1:13-14; 1 Peter 1:3; 3:15).
- The headship picture. We are united in the “One Lord.” This is Christ who is the Head of the church (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18). Acknowledging the lordship of Jesus Christ over your life is a giant step toward building spiritual unity among His people.
- The truth picture. We are united in “one faith” which is the body of revealed truth that all Christians believe and share together (Jude vs. 3).
- The baptism picture. We are united in “one baptism” which is the baptism of the Holy Spirit that brings us into the body and unites us together (1 Cor. 12:13). Since Paul is discussing the body of Christ it’s the Holy Spirit that forms this body and promoted unity.
- The Father picture. We are united with “One God” (vs. 5) who is God the “Father of all” (all Christians) and we share a relationship with this wonderful Father (Eph. 1:3, 17; 2:18; 3:14; 5:20). And this God is omnipotent (“above all”), sovereign (“through all”), and omnipresent (“in all”). God’s life is manifested in every believer since He is can be present at all places at the same time.

These statements are not necessarily a doctrinal statement but are pictures or illustrations of the unity we already have as believers. We share these blessings together and therefore should be unified in our practice and conduct.

Thomas Carlyle said:

"Ten men banded together in love and unity can do what ten thousand separately would fail to do."

6. The path to unity (Eph. 4:7-13)

Ephesians 4:13

"Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."

Paul is writing to the church at Ephesus to remind them how important unity is on the local church level. He teaches about the organism of the one universal Church and applies this teaching to the organization of the local church. In Ephesians 4:7-12 he is teaching that God gave the Church gifted people. The "apostles" and "prophets" (Eph. 4:11) were the foundational leaders of the Church (Eph. 2:20) but the "evangelists" along with the "pastors and teachers" (Eph. 4:11) were the future leaders of the Church. God gave these teachers to the Church in order to promote what he calls "the unity of the faith" (vs. 13). The point in this section of Scripture is that God gives to us special servant leaders for Church life and ministry. Their job is to teach us God's Word so we might be unified in the faith or doctrine in our local assemblies.

Once again, the expression "the faith" (vs. 13) is the body of revealed truth that all Christians believe. It is apostolic doctrine or the Bible that was given to us through the apostles (Eph. 2:20). When Paul says, "Til we all come in the unity of faith" speaks of the growth process. Young converts need to continually learn the Bible so they can experience the unity of the saints on a doctrinal basis. Why? It's because the path to all true unity is doctrine or the teaching of God's Word. We don't bypass doctrine for the sake of unity; we must travel the only path that leads to true unity – Bible doctrine. We unite

together under the umbrella of the unchanging truth of God's Word. We embrace it not as man's words, but as God's Word to us.

1 Thessalonians 2:13

"For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe."

Charles Spurgeon said:

"I fall before the majesty of revelation."

When we surrender to Scripture and what God tells us to do we will become unified as a body of believers. Doctrine is the groundwork to all true unity. Doctrine is the path that leads to unity. Every other path such as pragmatism, modernism, and ecumenicalism are false paths which do not promote true unity. Whenever we must sidestep some truth or doctrine for the sake of unity, then true unity is lost.

Acts 2:42 says, "And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine." Let us not forget where the true unity lies. It's in doctrinal teaching. The Holy Spirit is the author of God's Word (2 Pet. 1:21) and He unites us in the truth of Scripture (2 Tim. 2:15).

Charles Spurgeon also said:

"I am quite sure that the best way to promote union, is to promote truth."

Many today speak of the "fundamentals of the faith," and use four, five, or six doctrines as the basis for true unity. This is erroneous. How do we know what is major and minor? Who are we to label some apostolic teachings as non-essential (minor) and exalting others as essential (major)? The New Testament never divides doctrine into "essential" and "non-essential" or into "fundamental" and "superficial." Men do this today, but the apostles did not! We should view all doctrinal teaching as important and remember that we need to be unified in the teachings about the Holy Spirit (pneumatology) and Bible prophecy (eschatology) as much as we are unified in the doctrines of salvation (soteriology) and Jesus Christ (Christology). All doctrine is important and all doctrine creates unity. This is also true

regarding the doctrine of sanctification or “the doctrine which is according to godliness” (1 Cor. 6:3). Today God wants us to be unified in doctrine and holy living. This is where all true unity is found.

We now turn to another New Testament passage that teaches the importance of Christian unity within the local church assembly.

Philippians 2:1-8

“If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.”

This is Paul’s call to Christian unity. It’s part of living the Christian life. This is what the epistle of Philippians is all about. If we want to live the Christian life we must live the Christ life (Phil. 1:21) or live out the life, nature, and mind of Christ. In short, the Christ-life will promote unity among the brethren. Let us never forget this. When we are practicing unity we will be practicing the Christ life.

Each Sunday a particular minister would present a "children's sermon" to all the young children. On one occasion a bright-eyed three-year-old girl listened intently as he explained that God wanted them all to get along and love each other. "God wants us all to be one," he said. To which the little girl replied, "But I don't want to be one. I want to be four!"

This is a humorous story that brings to our attention the importance of being one or unified in our church ministry and outreach. God has called us to unity today on the local church level. The devil wants us to become divided over nonessential things and unimportant matters but God wants us to be unified in doctrine, ministry, and outreach.

There is another true story which is not humorous. It actually is a sad story which teaches the importance of joining hands together in God's work so we might be effective in the work of the Lord and seeing souls saved. A beautiful little girl wandered out one cold day into the countryside of Canada. The family finally realized she was lost and started a search. Then they called the people of the community together. Each went his own way. However, this decision, to search for the girl individually, became her death sentence. It soon became dark and the cold of the Canadian winter settled down. After some time someone suggested the searchers join hands and cover the grass fields. But it was too late. They found the girl curled up, frozen in the cold. Then the shout went up, "If only we had joined hands before!"

The spiritual meaning of this story is clear. Within assembly or church life we must join hands and learn the secret of dwelling together in unity. We must unite together and reach out to save the world instead of bypassing those who are lost. Also, when we are unified we will be able to overcome the enemy and have a joyful church ministry where the saints are encouraged together instead of battered and divided.

There are three lessons on unity in Philippians 2:1-8.

1. The basis of unity (Phil. 2:1).

"If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies. Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind."

In these verses Paul is arguing for the basis or foundation of all Christian unity. Since we all possess or share common and certain things as Christians we should in return express these same virtues to others. What is the Christian foundation of unity? The Christian foundation that is the basis for unity is expressed in several words.

a. Consolation (vs. 1)

In light of the suffering that Christians pass through for Christ (Phil. 1:29) there is need for consolation in the body of Christ. Paul speaks

of the “consolation in Christ” that they shared together. The word “consolation” in this context speaks of encouragement. Every believer finds their encouragement to live and go on because they are “in Christ” or vitally joined to His resurrection life. If I am going to make it in my Christian life I must find encouragement that only comes from Him. Paul’s point is this. So here is the first foundational truth for unity. The same encouragement we receive from our link and life with Christ should be expressed in the assembly life. The local church is to be a place of encouragement as God’s people express the same encouragement to others which they find in Christ. The consoling of the saints is a foundational base for church unity to exist on the local church level. When was the last time you reached out to encourage someone? When was the last time you did something for another Christian that would encourage them in their Christian life? We must remember that encouragement promotes unity. Encouragement leads to peaceful and purposeful pursuits in ministry. It leaves no room for schism, cliques, isolated groups, and divisions. Barnabas was a “son of consolation” or encouragement (Acts 4:36). May this be true of your life today. Make me a blessing to someone today!

b. Comfort (vs. 1)

Paul now speaks of the “comfort of love” that we all share as Christians. Paul recognized that God’s people could be comforted by the truth that God loves us and will never disown us. All of us are recipients of God’s love and find comfort from the fact that God loves us unconditionally (Rom. 8:38-39). I am loved! I am so glad that God’s love for me is not based on what I do for Him or how I live for Him. If this were true God would have the right to disown me and no longer love me. There is not one of us that are worthy of God’s love. However, God still loves us in spite of our failures and flaws. I am so glad that Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves even me! What comfort this brings to my soul today! I find consolation and comfort in the reality that God always loves me in spite of my imperfections and pitfalls. So here is another foundational truth for unity. Since God has loved us, through the sacrifice of His Son, we too should express the same type of love toward one another in local assembly life.

God’s love operating in people’s hearts produces spiritual unity among the brethren. God’s loving comfort, which we experience in

our daily lives, should be the same comfort we express to others in the local church. God has called us to a ministry of comforting love and not contention and strife. The moment God's love ceases to be real to us is the moment we lose affection for others. The one cannot exist without the other. Our appreciation and experience with God's love ("keep yourselves in the love of God" - Jude 21) will naturally lead us to love others, and by loving them, we will bring comfort into their lives. When we learn to comfort people (1 Thess. 5:14) by our expression of love we will be revealing Christ-likeness to them.

2 Corinthians 1:4

"Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God."

c. Companionship (vs. 1)

Paul not speaks of the companionship, fellowship, or Christian unity that believers can share because of the "fellowship of the Spirit." This expression probably refers to the companionship or fellowship that is created among the brethren which is the direct result of the unifying work of the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ ("unity of the Spirit" - Eph. 4:3). Just as encouragement comes from Christ and comfort comes from the Father's love, so fellowship in the body of Christ comes from the Holy Spirit. All three members of the trinity are involved in creating unity among the saints as we experience the encouragement, comfort, and fellowship that the Godhead gives. The fellowship we experience as a body of believers is the direct result of the Spirit's supernatural ministry upon our hearts and lives. The Spirit creates fellowship in our church ministries and this is a supernatural work. The Holy Spirit creates a love for the brethren in our hearts (1 John 3:14-16) and this love along with the outflow of other fruits related to the Spirit's work in our hearts (Gal. 5:22-23) becomes a foundational basis for Christian unity on the local church level.

"To dwell above with saints we love,
That will be grace and glory.
To live below with saints we know;
That's another story!"

Yes, it is another story. However, with the Spirit at work in our hearts and lives we can learn to practice unity in the midst of different personalities, problems, and the perils we face together as God's people.

d. Compassion (vs. 1)

When Paul speaks of "bowels and mercies" (not bowls of cherries) he is using an expression that points to the inner organs of the body where connotes the seat of emotions in a person such as the compassion and care that we are to express toward one another. We are to possess a natural sympathy and tenderness toward one another. The word "bowels" is used several times in the New Testament (Phil. 1:8; Phm. 1:20; 1 John 3:17) and points to the innermost being of a person. It refers to the inner heart and life of a person and is the place from which all true affection and desire originates.

Colossians 3:12

"Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering."

One of the Spirit's ministries is to produce within each believer a genuine concern and love for other members of God's family. This love will be seen as we express tender acts of mercies toward one another. What we need today is "bowels of mercies" instead of buffeting the saints. The saints need our kindness and tenderness. They don't need our backbiting and faultfinding. A caring attitude and expression toward one another is another foundation for Christian unity. When was the last time you expressed some true sympathy, concern, and assistance toward a saint who needed it? When was the last time you loved somebody? Acts 2:45 records that the early unified believers "sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need."

From his earliest years in Africa, David Livingstone was often critical of fellow missionaries. Soon after he arrived in the Cape Colony, he wrote, "The missionaries in the interior are, I am grieved to say, a sorry set. ... I shall be glad when I get away into the region beyond--away from their envy and backbiting." He added that there was no

more affection between them and himself than there was between his "riding ox and his grandmother."

The real enemies of unity are bitterness, jealousy, gossip, backbiting, faultfinding, and lovelessness. These are the evils that take a church down the road of disunity and sometimes down the road of death. Dearly beloved, God has called us to love the brethren and express care and compassion toward them in our attitudes, actions, and advice which we give to them. This compassion and concern expressed toward others becomes a foundational base for a strong working unity.

2. The benefits of unity (Phil. 2:2)

On the basis of what was just presented in verse one, Paul now wants us to consider the practical benefits that come from practicing Christian unity, which was outlined in verse one.

There are five benefits of Christian unity.

a. Joy

As a result of the saints practicing Christian unity (vs. 1), Paul's joy ("Fulfil ye my joy") would be overflowing and reach the intended goal that God has planned for his ministry. Let me just say that the preacher who sees God's people living together in unity has great joy. However, when he gets word that backbiting, gossip, and division are brewing in the church he has much grief. Many pastors suffer great hardship at the hands of divisive and unloving brethren who by their attitudes and actions try and sink the ship. Divisive brethren not only wreck ministries but they can also drive pastors out of ministry. A pastor experiences great joy when he knows the saints are unified and not clawing at one another.

b. Sameness

Corresponding to the foundational realities of unity, which were just expressed in verse one, Paul now says this spiritual unity should be experienced in a practical way by becoming "like-minded" (to mind or think the same thing) in relationship to spiritual truth, ministry, and

basic separated living. In other words, we must possess a similar outlook on ministry, worship, outreach, and sanctification if there is ever going to be unity. A meeting of the minds of God's saints will bring church squabbles to an end.

Acts 2:42 once again states:

“And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

This is sameness. When we believe, share, and practice the same things we become like-minded. For a congregation to be unified they must believe the same doctrine and be rowing in the same direction. The idea that there can be unity in diversity is true to a certain point. However, any cliché can be overused and can become abused. It's equally true there can be no true unity if we are not thinking the same doctrinally, spiritually, and ministerially. The benefit of unity is that we will not be doctrinally or spiritual diverse in our outlook and outreach.

Acts 2:44 then says of the early believers:

“And all that believed were together, and had all things common.”

Common ground breeds unity. It's also a wonderful benefit that God's people experience as they seek to work and function together.

c. Love

Here is another benefit of unity. We can possess the “same love” (unconditional love) that God has expressed to us (John 3:16). Love is the sweetest flower that blooms in God's garden. Love in any church ministry binds us together (“knit together in love” – Col. 2:2). It's the glue or cement that causes us to stick together even during hard and challenging times. Blest be the tie that binds, our hearts in Christian love! We should love the brethren (John 15:12; 1 John 4:7-8), and also love the Bible (Ps. 119:97), love God's work (1 Cor. 15:58), love God's workmen (2 Pet. 3:15), and most certain we should love to evangelize (1 Thess. 1:8) or share the same message of the Gospel with the lost.

d. Care

We should also be “of one accord” or “one soul” (used only here in the New Testament). The soul speaks of the seat of feelings, affections, and desires in a person. When we are “one soul” we will have the same inner motives, concerns, and beliefs. This is a wonderful benefit of unity.

Acts 4:32

“And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common.”

Instead of being a double minded group of people (James 1:8) we can unite our souls or inner lives together in truth, compassion, and sanctification. We must bury disagreements so deep that we become one soul possessing unity of mind, heart and purpose in the Lord.

We need to link our hearts together instead of bang our heads together! To be united is much better than being untied. What are you doing to promote unity among the brethren? Are your attitudes, actions, and involvement in church life and ministry conducive to unity? Are you a promoter of unity instead of division? Are you grumbling, gossiping, and getting sidetracked with your own personal agendas? If so, you cannot be a promoter of unity.

e. Understanding

Finally, we should be “of one mind” (understanding and thinking) regarding doctrine, purity, holiness (Phil. 4:8), and God’s purpose for church life and ministry. We should be thinking and moving in the same direction regarding ministry instead of being divided. Being of the same mind means to actively strive to achieve common understanding and genuine agreement among the brethren. As a local body of believers we should be in agreement over ministry and cherish the same views regarding truth, worship, evangelism, and the basic way to live the Christian life.

The early Christians united together in doctrinal truth, communion, and the importance of prayer. It is impossible to have unity when we are not thinking alike or concentrating on the same things. Although there is room for some general diversity within the local church body

there must also be similarity in thinking regarding sanctified ministry and Bible doctrine (Acts 2:42).

Philippians 4:2

“I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord.”

Two of the hens were fighting in the church of Philippi and Paul needed to address this matter. I’m not sure, but I think one of the ladies wanted blue drapes while the other wanted red! Paul exhorts these ladies to be “of the same mind in the Lord.” They were to be in agreement within the work of the Lord and seek to unite in God’s work and for His cause. This means they were to possess the same thinking regarding truth, ministry, how to resolve their differences, and treat one another in assembly life. Of course, it is impossible for us to be united in every little detail revolving around daily living; however, as far as the things of the Lord or the work of the Lord is concerned, it is possible for us to get rid of our petty or personal differences in order that the Lord may be magnified and His work advanced. Then too, even in church ministry we must sometimes learn to see the viewpoint of others, which may be different from our own, to maintain unity. I’m talking about minor or trivial things that do not matter. I’m not referring to doctrine or upholding the absolute standard of God’s holiness. Sometimes it’s not our difference of opinion that creates disunity but rather our wrong attitude toward others whose viewpoint or way of doing something may differ.

Since these two ladies were “in Christ,” or at union with Him, they were to act like Christ in their actions and attitudes by humbling themselves, forgiving one another, and expression love to each other. In short, they were to start behaving like Christians should behave toward one another. They needed to express forgiveness, love, humility, and tenderness to each other and become unified in assembly life and God’s work. They were to be unified in their church life and ministry.

A high school orchestra was preparing for a concert that featured a pianist in a rendition of Grieg's A-minor concerto. Before the performance, it was customary for the orchestra to tune up with an "A" sounded by the oboe player. But the oboist was a practical joker,

and he had tuned his instrument a half step higher than the piano. You can imagine the effect. After the pianist played a beautiful introduction, the members of the orchestra joined in. What confusion! Every instrument was out of tune with the piano. If we are not careful this can happen in a local church. We can become out of tune with one another.

In Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, the apostle mentioned these two ladies who were "out of tune" with each other. In an otherwise peaceful and growing assembly of believers, Euodias and Syntyche were spiritually "off key." This prompted Paul to write, "I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord" (Phil. 4:2). He wanted these two women to know that the unity among the brethren was important to the ongoing work of the local church. You will note that Paul begged that these two women would be "of the same mind" or understanding regarding God's work and church ministry. They were to forgive, resolve their differences, unite in the truth, and agree to work together in ministry so that church ministry would not be affected by their sin (1 Cor. 5:6).

3. The behavior of unity (Phil. 2: 3-4)

"Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others."

If we are going to have unity we must behave properly. We must stop promoting ourselves among the brethren and pushing our own little agenda. We must swallow our own ideas, goals, and pride. We cannot have our own personal fling and do our own thing without the consent and approval of the body. God has called us to stand with the rest of the saints as they follow the direction of church leadership. When we do this we can experience the blessing of church unity.

a. Adverse behavior (vs. 3a)

When Paul speaks of "strife or vainglory" he is referring to how the saints begin to advertise themselves by pursuing their own selfish ambitions and goals in ministry and demonstrating their pride before

others. Strife and vainglory are two of the greatest enemies of unity among the people of God.

The word “strife” (eritheia) speaks of a person who selfishly puts themselves first and who causes a fractious spirit within the assembly. The word is often associated with rivalry, quarreling, infighting, and division. This is what takes place when one puts their own opinions and ideas before the Bible, others, and stands alone in assembly life. Paul lists “strifes” or disputes as one of the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:20). Those who are convinced of their own superior abilities and selfish ways breed anger, resentment, and jealousy within the church. No church, even the most doctrinally sound, is immune from the threat of this sin, and nothing can more quickly divide and weaken a church than selfish ambition.

Strife is often evidenced by a spirit of criticism and chronic complaining.

Philippians 2:14

“Do all things without murmurings and disputings.”

The word “murmurings” means to secretly debate under the pastors authority and church fellowship about alleged problems. When one murmurs they are grumbling about something and stirring up strife. We must beware of a grumbling and grumpy overtone! Do not join the devil’s crowd by engaging all of your energies in grumbling or secretly debating about alleged church problems and in so doing stirring up strife and misery for the people of God.

Numbers 20:2

“And there was no water for the congregation: and they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron.”

When the people rise up against the God-ordained leadership that is doing right and following God they are actually trying to promote disunity and disaster in church ministry. Beware of becoming a musty, dusty, grumpy Christian.

Paul Van Gorder said of these brethren:

“They sit, soak, and sour.”

Numbers 21:5

“And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread.”

Referring to these grumbling people Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:10: “Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer.”

Murmurings (Phil. 2:14), if allowed to continue, will result in disputings (Phil. 2:14). Beware of the dividing utterances that can fall from your lips. They will cause strife and division within the local church assembly. Murmurings and disputings break our fellowship with God and with one another. We must cast out these two ugly monsters and rid our church ministries of inner conflict and discontent.

I recently purchased an alligator head. My wife thinks it looks ugly and she is right. There is nothing beautiful about an alligator head. However, the same is true about murmurings or the secret debates and gossip that occurs behind the back of church leaders and which divides the saints. Murmurings are like alligator heads. They are ugly. The truth is this. We must get rid of the alligator head in church ministry if we want God to open the floodgates of His blessing.

In Philippians 2:3 the word “vainglory” (empty glory) speaks of pride or a vain opinion of oneself. Paul is describing the person who has an inflated ego of himself. He is the individual who likes to brag about his accomplishments and who pursues self-glory instead of giving God the glory (1 Cor. 10:31). The disciples at one point had the spirit of vain glory residing within them (Luke 22:24). The concept behind “vainglory” is that it is an empty glory. In appearance it may seem to be spiritually impressive, but inside there is no substance. It is like a balloon. The larger a balloon stretches on the outside, the bigger the emptiness becomes on the inside. The Pharisees possessed this type of empty glory when they fasted, prayed, and gave in order to be seen of men (Matt. 6:1-18). Diotrophes had this type of glory when he strived to attain preeminence with the church (3 John 9). When

people want glory they will do anything to get it. They will divide the church and seek to promote their own agenda to do it.

Paul lists strifes and pride (vainglory) together for they are twin sins. Selfish ambition or strife is the desire to be number one, no matter what the cost. This selfish ambition results in conceit, pride, or self-display. Strife is the symptom and vainglory is the disease that often comes from strife. Wherever you find people who are interested in gathering a clique around themselves or in promoting their own interests, there you will find the seeds of contention, strife, and the exaltation of self (pride). The sins of personal ambition and vainglory lead to many selfish actions, hatred, envy, jealousy, and countless other evils that are the fruit of self-love. This is adverse behavior which breaks the unity of the saints.

b. Advantageous behavior (3b)

The kind of behavior that promotes unity is now described:

i. Humble attitude

It is difficult and virtually impossible to have unity among the brethren when humility is not present. When Paul speaks of “lowliness of mind” he is referring primarily to an attitude (“With all lowliness” – Eph. 4:2). Instead of promoting yourself with a spirit of strife and vainglory one should possess a humble attitude toward the saints. It’s a humble attitude that is willing to submit to church authority and to others without causing a rift in church life and ministry. Unity is available and attainable if we adopt the right attitude! It’s an attitude of humble submission.

Philippians 2:5

“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.”

This is a humble mind that looks out for others instead of oneself. This was true of Christ when He came into the world to die for sinners. The *humble* mind is a *submissive* mind that is willing to follow the leadership and conclusions of others, even when one doesn’t always fully agree with them, or understand them. When we don’t see eye to eye on everything how do we resolve our

differences? We don't get on the phone and start murmuring and grumbling. Instead, we must possess a humble mind and be willing to submit to one another (Eph. 5:21) instead of causing division in a church ministry. This of course is not talking about submitting to error and unholy practices (Eph. 5:11) but to those decisions and directives which are outside the realm of Christian doctrine and duty.

When the Scripture says, "let each esteem other better than themselves" it means to declare that others are more important than ourselves. This means we are to have a high opinion of others and disregard for ourselves. One way we express humility is to lift up others without exalting ourselves. Don't misunderstand what Paul is teaching. To pretend we do not have abilities which we know we possess is not humility. It's actually hypocrisy. Paul is simply saying that we should seek to give preferential treatment to others and build them up instead of ourselves.

Another way to express humility is to be willing to submit to the directives and decisions of others without causing a rift or split in church life. When we esteem others better than ourselves we will be willing to surrender and submit to godly church leadership and follow the guidelines and goals related to church ministry. Esteeming (Phil. 4:3) and preferring (Rom. 12:10) others better than ourselves will lead to unity instead of disunity. It will keep us from a spirit of rivalry and competition which the Scripture condemns (2 Cor. 10:12). The word "esteem" actually suggests that we will allow others to take the lead and to go before us. It means we don't have to have our way but are willing to consider the wishes and wants of others before our own.

When Christians "esteem other better than themselves" they will promote and build up others because they possess a servant mind and remember that they are just sinners saved by grace who are worthy of no praise or glory (Rom. 12:3). Sinners saved by grace don't want any special treatment. They don't want to promote themselves or insist on having their own way. Every Christian should recognize that they are what they are by the grace of God (1 Cor. 15:10). This keeps them humble before others and gives them a submissive heart and mind in church ministry and life. A Christian who remembers what God has done for him will have no problem taking the back seat on the bus. He will be willing to esteem others

before himself and surrender his wishes and plans to others. A proper view of God's grace, and where a person is because of God's grace, will keep him humble in church ministry, instead of divisive and schismatic.

Who are you? You are just a sinner saved by grace. Therefore, when you stand against the other saints who are pulling for a church ministry, you actually forget who you are. You have forgotten that you are just a sinner saved by grace and that you are no better than anyone else. Therefore, instead of standing alone, like you are better than the other brethren, you might as well unite with the rest of them. The truth is this. We are all sinners saved by grace. When we remember this it will keep us humble, spiritually in tune with the rest of the believers in the local assembly, and stop grumbling, and division from occurring. We will all humble ourselves before others and be willing to get along as grateful people who have been touched by the grace of God. So take your place with the other sinners saved by grace and stop thinking about your own personal agenda or direction that you want to go. We are called upon to esteem others better than ourselves (our position, plans, preferences) and be ready to unite with the brethren.

When we "esteem other better than themselves," or give preferential treatment to others, we will be expressing humility, and be willing to step back and not have our way or become divisive in church ministry. Humility does not mean you think lowly of yourself, it means you don't think of yourself at all! You put others first and yourself last. You are willing to be submissive to others instead of becoming schismatic and a detriment to ministry. We should extend to our brothers and sisters the right hand of fellowship instead of the right fist of fellowship.

ii. Humble action (vs. 4)

The way we think reveals the way we are and what we will eventually do. If we think properly we will also act properly. Paul now says, "Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others." This is putting humility into action. Our attitude must now result in action. The selfish or self-seeking person always looks out for themselves (Phil. 2:21 – "for all seek their own"). He is taken

up with his own interests and is concerned about his own ego. However, the humble person is more concerned about the interests and exaltation of others. Human fallen nature and psychology wants us to believe that life's greatest happiness is achieved by following and satisfying our own desires. Humanistic therapies inform us that we must first have all our needs and desires fulfilled before we can reach out to others. But this is not what God's Word says nor commands us to do. We are called upon to reach out to others.

You will find that a humble person is people oriented. A humble person has a desire to invest himself in the lives of others and meet their needs. The Bible says, "Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others." When we look (scope or take aim) on the things of others it means we are not to have a selfish outlook on life. We should not be looking out only for our own interests saying: What's in it for me? What will I get out of it? Rather, the believer should be looking out for the interests of others and seek to build them up and assist them in life. We should ask: "What are the needs of my brother? What can I do to help him?"

Romans 15:1-2

"We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification."

This kind of attitude and action will keep a church unified. When we are looking out for the interests of others, instead of our own interests, we will be willing to get along with others and not become divisive in a church ministry by wanting our own way and seeking to move in a direction that no one else is going.

Charles D. Meigs

"Others, Lord, yes, others,
Let this my motto be;
Help me to live for others,
That I might live like Thee."

Churches can experience disunity between several people, different groups, and sometimes among the whole congregation because of

personal selfishness and a lack of love toward the brethren. God has called us to selflessness instead of selfishness. He has called us to consider the needs of others and not our own. He has called us to humble ourselves as Christ did, put others first, and reach out to meet the needs of others.

3. The beauty of unity (Phil. 2:5-8).

“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.”

In these verses Paul is using Christ as the greatest example of true submissive humility in both attitude and action. The true beauty of humility is brought out in the condescension of Christ. Christ surrendered or submitted to the Father’s plan. This was the greatest act of humility. Christ humbled Himself before the Father and died for lost sinners.

One writer said:

“Leaving the angelic hosts who flooded his presence with adoring praise, he unselfishly accepted a role that would require his being misunderstood, abused, cursed, and crucified. He unhesitatingly surrendered the fellowship and protection of the Father’s glory for the lonely path of obedience and torturous death.”

What humility and surrender! Believers are to possess the attitude of a humble mind, even as Christ possessed (vs. 5), when He came into this world to die the sinner’s death on Calvary (vv. 6-8). The key expressions “no reputation,” “the form of a servant,” “made in the likeness of men,” “humbled himself,” and “obedient unto death” all point to Christ’s humility. The true kenosis of Christ is that He emptied Himself of the radiant glory He possessed at the Father’s right hand and displayed no selfish ambition in His attitude and actions. He stepped out of the glory to become the servant and Savior for lost mankind. He could have called ten thousand angels! But instead He died for you and me. Christ was not looking out for Himself. He didn’t

think of Himself at all when He came into the world to die for lost sinners! He thought of others. He thought of you and me. He died for you and me.

Christ surrendered to the Father's plan and humbled Himself. The same should be true for each believer in relationship to church ministry and life. They should be willing to surrender to the program of church ministry, the directions and decisions of others, and unite with the brethren. Dear friend, unity can only exist when we possess a submissive mind. The greatest example of a submissive mind and humility is seen in the condescension of Jesus Christ and His death upon the cross. When our attitude is right our actions will be right. When we possess a humble and submissive mind we will practice submission to others and not seek our own little plan, program, and personal preference, which may divide the saints and break fellowship in the local church.

Pride and personal gain will destroy our churches. However, humility is the glue that holds them together. Just accept your place in the body of Christ as a sinner saved by grace. This will keep you in tune with the rest of the saints. It will cause you to remember that you are no better than the rest and unite with saints in humility and love.

Someone said:

"A life wrapped up in itself is a very small package."

How very true! We must deny self and put others and church ministry before our desires. We must be willing to surrender our wants, wishes, and whimsical ideas for the sake of unity among the brethren. Like Christ we must condescend, humble ourselves, put others first, and be willing to unite with the rest of the saints. The picture of Christ hanging on the dreadful cross in submission to the Father's will reminds us of the kind of submissive humility we should possess today among the brethren in order to have unity.

It is estimated that if all of the American colonies would have been more unified at the time of the American Revolution, we could have won the war for independence in 1 year; instead, because of division, it took 8 bloody years of battle. God has not called the individual members of the local church to war against one another but to remain

unified as we humbly submit to one another and express love toward all the saints.

A man went to an asylum for the criminally insane. He was a bit surprised to find that there were only three guards to take care of a hundred inmates. He said to one of the guards, "Aren't you afraid that these insane inmates will unite, overcome you, and escape?" The guard said "Lunatics never unite." I thought of what this guard said in relationship to the church. Christians should unite together and receive a great blessing from the Lord in their church ministries. If we don't unite together in unity we don't know where our power really lies.

Acts 2:42

“And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

This New Testament verse records the experience of the first Christians on the Day of Pentecost and how they expressed their unity with one another.

There are four marks of unity found in Acts 2:42.

a. The mark of doctrine

The Bible says the early church “continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine.” Doctrinal teaching was the foundation of unity within the first local church. Please notice the importance of doctrinal teaching on the Lord's Day. The early church was noted by its doctrinal teaching and foundation.

1 Timothy 1:3 - “that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine”

1 Timothy 1:10 - “sound doctrine”

1 Timothy 4:6 - “nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine”

1 Timothy 1:16 - "take heed unto thyself and unto the doctrine;
continue in them"

1 Timothy 6:3 - "wholesome words"

Titus 1:9 - "Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught" and
"sound doctrine"

Titus 2:1 - "But speak thou things which become sound doctrine."

One charismatic preacher was calling for every church to unite together in spite of their doctrinal differences. He said, "I'm tired of everyone speaking to me about their "doctrinal doo doo." This preacher had no regard for doctrinal truth. He only wanted to emphasize extra-biblical experiences over the truth. However, Paul told Titus to "speak thou things which become sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1). The emphasis in the early church was upon healthy doctrine and not experience.

There are several things to remember when it comes to the unity of doctrine. First, all doctrine is important. The Bible does not distinguish between greater and lesser doctrines of importance. We have already mentioned this but it is worth repeating. The teachings about the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts, eternal security, or prophecy are just as important as the doctrines of Christ or salvation. It is unscriptural to think that only a few "cardinal" Bible doctrines are crucial while other New Testament teachings and practices are not important and can be ignored for the sake of unity. No person has the right to label some apostolic teachings as non-essential (minor) and exalting others as essential (major). The New Testament never divides doctrine into "essential" and "non-essential," or into "fundamental" and "superficial." Men do this today, but the apostles did not! The point is this. All doctrine is important and all doctrine creates unity. It does not matter whether it's doctrinal teaching regarding salvation, sanctification, spiritual gifts, or specific teaching on the doctrines of eschatology and the Holy Spirit.

A second lesson we learn from this Bible text is that God's Word was preached on the Lord's Day. Sunday was not given to psychology, power teams, bowling for Jesus, films, plays, or drama. It was given

to doctrinal teaching. Whatever happened to doctrine? The word doctrine means teaching and teaching the Word in a clear expository fashion is what is needed in the church today.

2 Timothy 4:2

“Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

We must be ready (“be instant”) to preach, reprove (convict) when we preach, rebuke (warn) as we preach, and redirect (“exhort” or instruct) the lives of God’s while we preach. One pastor told me that a lady in his church told him that she was leaving the church because they did not serve hot coffee and doughnuts in the morning. She told him that she wanted a cup of coffee when she comes to church and she can find plenty of other churches that serve hot coffee. The preacher told her in a nice way, “You could make your own decaff coffee at home if you would get up a little earlier.” Dear friend, there is nothing wrong with drinking coffee at church socials. But the church service is not about drinking coffee, hot chocolate, or eating cookies. You don’t come to church for doughnuts you come to church for doctrine! The church is about getting doctrine or the teaching of God’s Word.

The church gathered together to hear doctrinal Bible teaching. Why? It’s because there is unity in doctrine! We have already talked about “the unity of the faith” (Eph. 4:13). Also note in Acts 2:42 that doctrine comes before fellowship. Do you know why? It’s because experience must always be tested by doctrine, not doctrine by experience. The early church was first marked by truth and this is why it was to be called “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 tim. 3:15) This must be true of our fundamental churches today as well. We want to be marked as a church that upholds the truth at all costs. If the truth cannot be fearlessly proclaimed in the church then what place is there for the truth?

It is very important that we note this term “continued stedfastly” or continually devoting themselves to the teaching of the apostles. This denotes a steadfast and single-minded devotion to a certain course of action – the teaching of the Word of God. In short, they were dedicated to doctrine! They did not want little psychological

sermonettes that talk about “How to Get Up When You Are Down” or “You Can Do It” or “How to Be Happy While Being Married.” What we need is the power of God’s Word being presented so we can be challenged and changed to live righteously and victoriously for God in the midst of a spiritually crooked generation.

These believers continued steadfastly in the practical teaching of the Scriptures. Acts 2:42 says that these 3,000 baby Christians were continually devoting themselves to God’s Word as it came from the apostles. What are you devoted to these days? Where is our heart? What interests you more than the Bible? Where are your priorities?

Luke 24:32

“And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?”

The Christians you meet in the Book of Acts were not content to meet once a week for “services as usual” nor were they pressing to get an early service started so they could go golfing before noon on Sunday. They met daily (Acts 2:46), won souls daily (Acts 2:47), cared daily (Acts 6:1), searched the Scriptures daily (Acts 17:11), and increased in number daily (Acts 16:5). Their Christian faith was a day-to-day reality, not a once-a-week routine.

Hosea 4:6 says, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge:” We must remember that the church cannot operate on truth it is not taught, believers function on principles they have not learned, nor can God’s saints grow in their Christian lives without the truth of God’s Word.

1 Peter 2:2

“As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby.”

The example of an energetic nursing baby is a fitting example for us to pursue, when it comes to learning the Scriptures. Young believers must make sure they are feeding on the teaching of God’s Word. We live in an experience-oriented culture where solid Bible teaching is sometimes hard to find. Believers should beware of churches or

Christian fellowships where the people do not carry their Bibles and where the Bible is not taught. Read your Bible. Mark it up or else the world will make you up! Each of us must make sure that we are being taught the milk (1 Pet. 2:2) and meat (1 Cor. 3:2) of Scripture.

One day I was talking to another preacher and described my church as a Bible-believing church. He stopped me, paused, and said slowly, "Are you a Bible-*living* church?" This is a good question! We not only need to be Bible believing but Bible living!

b. The mark of fellowship

The second mark of church unity was their fellowship, which may be defined as the breaking of bread and prayer in this text (Acts 2:42). The omission of the conjunction "and" in the Greek text between the word "fellowship" and the last two activities of the early church ("breaking of bread" and "prayer") may indicate that the last two activities are appositional or related to the word fellowship. In other words, true fellowship in the church is not about punch and cookies but about taking the Lord's Table together and praying together. Many times we think fellowship is just about playing games together but true spiritual fellowship resides in uniting together around God's table and praying together! When you come to prayer meeting you are fellowshiping with God's people. When you take communion with God's people you are fellowshiping with them. When was the last time you did these things with God's people?

I have found out over the years that a great many Christians push for what they think fellowship should be in the local church. They want more activities, more picnics, more clubs, more women's meetings, and on and on it goes. I'm not denying we can experience fellowship through these activities nor am I downgrading them. However, we must remember that real spiritual fellowship is found when we meet together around the truth of God's Word, the table of God's remembrance, and the time of prayer.

It's equally true that we can experience fellowship with one another as we share hospitality, common meals, and extend friendship to others within assembly life.

Romans 12:13

“Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality.”

The Bible declares that the early Christians shared what they possessed (“And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men” – Acts 2:45). A church that continues to express hospitality and friendship toward one another is a church that can experience rich fellowship in the Lord. Many times we need to come out of our shell and become part of the answer to a vibrant growing fellowship in the local church. When was the last time you had someone over to your home to fellowship with them and encourage them in the Lord? When was the last time we sought to meet with someone after an evening service to spend some extra time with them? Fellowship is experienced in church services and also out of church services.

c. The mark of breaking bread

The third mark of unity was sharing together in the communion service (Acts 2:42). The breaking of bread or communion service is a wonderful way to express unity with one another in the local church assembly.

1 Corinthians 10:16-17

“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.”

Receiving communion together (the bread and cup) points to our oneness or unity that we share together through Christ. We are pictured as being “one bread” and “one body” since we have all shared in the benefits of Christ’s sacrificial death upon the cross. This means that our communion service is to be an expression of our unity that we share because of the work of Jesus Christ. As we pass the bread and cup we are to experience a special “communion of the blood of Christ” and “communion of the body of Christ.” This means as we pass the elements of the Lord’s Table we are to commune or fellowship together as God’s saints since we have all been saved through Christ’s death upon the cross. The collective worship of

Christians at the Lord's Supper is a way to express unity among the members of a local assembly – the unity we share as blood-washed believers.

And the Lord's Table was not just some kind of ceremony that God's people passed through faint-heartedly. It was a holy and sacred time when they would remember the Lord's death on their behalf. The communion service kept Calvary real and dear to their hearts! Lord make Calvary real to me! We experience unity around the communion table as we remember Calvary, the cross, the Christ who loved us and died for us. Communion and Calvary unifies God's saints. It melts our hearts and brings us together in humility and confirms our fellowship as God's saints.

d. The mark of prayers

Another mark of unity that was found in the first local church was the mark of praying together (Acts 2:42). Dearly beloved, there is no other hope but prayer! Prayer is the engine of the local church. God blesses in accordance with proper prayer going up by his holy people. The machinery of the local church and wheels of the church is prayer. Prayer keeps things running smoothly and moving according to God's sovereign plan and purpose.

Acts 3:1

“Now Peter and John went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour.”

Let us remind ourselves that the hour of prayer becomes the hour of power for the local church assembly and our individual Christian lives.

“Sweet hour of prayer! sweet hour of prayer,
That calls me from a world of care,
And bids me at my Father's throne
Make all my wants and wishes known;
In seasons of distress and grief
My soul has often found relief,
And oft escaped the tempter's snare,
By thy return, sweet hour of prayer.”

Churches are no longer are having prayer meetings. The saints are too busy to come out. Too busy to pray!! Dearly beloved, if we are too busy to pray then we are too busy.

D. L. Moody said:

“If you have so much business to attend to that you have no time to pray, depend upon it, you have more business on hand than God ever intended you should have”.

We need to remember that we experience unity as we come together for prayer and intercede for one another through prayer.

Ephesians 6:18

“Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.”

Prayer was an integral part of early church life. The saints knew and understood the importance of praying for one another so that they might experience victory over the Evil One and not become discouraged in their Christian lives. There is no other hope but prayer! A praying church is a powerful church. A praying church is a victorious church. A praying church is a unified church.

Acts 2:42 reveals to us the Biblical marks of true unity as they are found in the local church. “And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

One preacher of a large church remarked:

“We have put a lot of time and thought into what non-churched people want from a Sunday morning service, and we have concluded that they basically want four things: Anonymity, uncomplicated teaching, a non-threatening environment, and contemporary relevancy.”

This is the pragmatic worldly concept of our day. Thousands and thousands of churches have adopted this method. That is why the church today has “aped” or copied just about every fad that secular society has to offer. The church offers talk shows, musical videos,

heavy-metal rock, rap, break dancing, bodybuilding, bowling allies, brick smashing, interpretive dance, and stand-up comedian acts. Many people today really believe that unless we accommodate the Gospel and our church services with secular fads and the fashions of our own day and time that the Gospel and the church can't be effective. All of these things are used to *supplement* the God ordained preaching of the Bible and the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

My friend, the early church came together to hear doctrinal teaching, to fellowship, break bread, and pray together. Pragmatism had nothing to do with the early church meetings. Do you know why? It's because the church meetings were not designed to accommodate the lifestyle of the unsaved. I might add that there were no drama or theatrical productions taking the place in place of the Word of God so that people would become more interested in the church. There were no worldly gimmicks or merchandizing schemes to get people in the front door and keep them in the church. The early church was not concerned about the world's opinion of their church services like so many churches are today. *They did not seek to entertain or amuse their pagan neighbors in the services.* God has not called us to market the masses to fill our churches. God has called us to honor His Word and holiness in our assemblies.

One lady asked me what my church had to offer her. I said we don't have anything to offer her but what the church is supposed to offer – the Gospel, the Word, the Lord's Table, fellowship, and the breaking of bread. I then asked her what she has to offer to Jesus? A man asked me if we had contemporary music in the church. He said that he could never worship God where this music was not played. My friend, the church is in a terrible pragmatic dilemma today and it's getting further and further away from the true purpose of the local assembly.

Let me give you the Pragmatic Bible Version of Acts 2:42:
“And they continued stedfastly in Christian Rock Music and eating doughnuts, and in drama presentations, and in their own way of doing things.”

No one can whistle a symphony. It takes an orchestra to play it. As we remember the marks of true Biblical unity for local church life and

ministry we can become like an orchestra playing a symphony together. Unity is beautiful music. The unsaved need to see our unity and understand that there is something drastically different about Christians.

Let us remember that marriage is a metaphor for the Church (Eph. 5:23). The Church is married to Christ who is our head. As marriage partners together with Christ we are called upon to live in unity and peace with one another. The local church has a unity we are to preserve similar to that of a marriage. Our marriage relationship with Christ demands unity among the believers. We are to be one body united to Christ and following His headship and direction.

In the context of the epistles we find that there are three keys to church unity.

1. Submission to spiritual leadership

Hebrews 13:17

“Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.”

Submission and obedience to those who are pastors or leaders within the local assemblies is an important key to church unity. Every church needs a leader and a leader must be followed so that we can experience unity together on a local church level. We can't expect to have unity without a leader guiding us and bringing us together under the authority of God's Word and giving us spiritual direction. The congregations are not to be leaders in the local assemblies. Not everyone can be a leader. If everyone would be a leader chaos would abound. Every business knows this. God has always called a man to lead His local church.

A. W. Tozer said:

“John's (John the Baptist) greatness was this – He ‘...*was a man sent from God ...*’ – John 1:6. You cannot deny that the life and vitality of the Christian Church lie in the spiritual leadership of men anointed of the Holy Ghost. I dare to tell you that there is a danger in too much democracy in the life of the Church ... I do not believe that God

expects the Church to thrive and mature and grow just on plain democratic principles. Of course, most Baptists think that the Church is a democracy, but that is because they never bothered to study the Scriptures. Search the New Testament epistles and see if you can find any congregational voting! Over and over again, God has called a man and used him to accomplish His work. God sent a man, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Peter, Paul, etc. God never sent a board or committee. Well, what about Elders and Deacons? Do you mean that it is wrong to have these or other committees in the Church? No, but it is pretty difficult to get much accomplished with a group of individuals, especially if each has his own idea about what ought to be done. Few realize that Elders, Deacons, and other committees have been called to help the man God has called! Sometimes the problem on these boards is some are not content to follow ... they think they must lead. In the local Church, God has called a man, a Pastor, and He gives others to help that man get the job done. He's God's man who leads the way! He is not simply a dictator, but he is God's appointed man to lead the sheep! Sheep need a shepherd, not a committee. Three times in Hebrews 13 it says in effect: '*Obey them that have the rule over you ...*' Let's do it God's way and have God's blessing!"

Several years ago, in England, Sir John Barbirolli was conducting a great symphony orchestra before a "standing room only" audience. The concert hall was unusual in that it was used for cultural events on weekdays and for religious services on Sundays. On this particular Saturday evening, one of the patrons of the orchestra noticed that the clergyman who was to preach there the next day was in the audience. He leaned over and said to him, cynically, "When are you going to fill this hall on Sunday the way Sir John Barbirolli has tonight?" The clergyman looked his antagonist straight in the eye and said with a steady voice, "I will fill this hall on Sunday morning when you give to me, as you gave to Sir John tonight, eighty-five disciplined men and women to be with him and to work with him."

2. Servant leadership and living

In John 13 Jesus washed the disciples feet to indicate the important of being a servant to others. No matter what God has called us to do in the local church we must remember to be a servant. Servant

leadership and living is another key that promotes unity in the local church assembly. No person can be a true leader without first being a true servant.

2 Timothy 2:24

“And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient.”

Whether leader or laymen a person must learn to be a servant of others. People respond and unite under those who have a servant's heart toward people. You can't fool people when it comes to who you are and what you are like. The president and leader of the Bible College, where I attended, reminds me of a man who has a servant's heart. I remember him making popcorn for the students and sharing it with them. He never displayed himself as a man who was above others. My son was recently invited to a meal with the vice president of the Bible College where he now attends. At first I think he was somewhat apprehensive wondering what it would be like to eat with the vice president and his family. After he was back in his dorm he called me and said, “Dad, they were normal people just like us!” The point is this. You can't fool people. If you possess a servant's heart others will notice and respond to you.

3. Spiritual fruit and graces

Galatians 5:22-23

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.”

We are not going to study each of these fruit qualities or graces that are linked with Christian living. However, everybody knows that when leaders and laymen are putting into practice this kind of fruitful living obedience, fellowship, and harmony are much easier to maintain in a local assembly. We both demonstrate and maintain unity by expressing the fruit of the Spirit in and through our lives.

4. Showing hospitality toward the saints

We have talked about this under our last point. However, we must remind ourselves that church unity is expressed by reaching out to others and showing mercy and hospitality to them within the local assembly.

1 Peter 4:9

“Use hospitality one to another without grudging.”

God’s people are looking for fellowship and friendship among the saints. Showing hospitality toward God’s people is a wonderful way to bring encouragement into their lives and develop spiritual friendships. In addition, we encourage one another and express unity together when we join a church and become an active serving member. God wants us to get on board in a local church ministry (church membership), become committed to it, and care for one another in the local body of believers. Many saints attend the local church but are not active in the local church. They are interested in hearing Bible messages but are not interested in building the local church through prayer, hospitality, and soul winning. It’s time to get serious about the local church.

5. Striving together for the Gospel

Philippians 1:27

“Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.”

We have studied this verse earlier. However, the individual importance of this point cannot be overstated. Striving together speaks of an athletic term. The local assembly is to be like an athletic team working together both protecting and proclaiming “the faith of the gospel.” The expression “the faith” refers to the body of truth that Christians believe in – the Gospel being the foundational truth. God has given us the Gospel mandate to share the Gospel message with others. As we protect this message and prayerfully move out together with this message we will see souls saved and our hearts will be blessed as we witness the movement of God. God wants us to be serving together and striving together to get the Gospel message to

lost sinners before it's eternally too late. The local church is compared to a team sharing the Gospel message with those who are unsaved.

“Somebody's never heard of You,
Somebody's searching for the Truth,
Not too far from here.
Somebody wants to hear you speak
And somebody's ready to believe
Not too far from here.”

Let us remember that we can each reach one! In fact, we can reach some that others cannot reach. We can be used of God to rescue people from the broad road of destruction. What a ministry!

“Rescue the perishing,
Duty demands it;
Strength for thy labor the Lord will provide;
Back to the narrow way
Patiently win them;
Tell the poor wand'rer a Savior has died.

Rescue the perishing,
Care for the dying;
Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save.”

If we don't teach the word we will capsize; if we don't evangelize we will fossilize! Let's get busy. Together we can share Christ with others.

Sandhill cranes are very interesting creatures. It seems that these large birds, who commute great distances and move across continents, have a remarkable quality. They choose a leader that can handle turbulence. And then, all during the time one bird is leading, the rest are honking, signaling their affirmation. This is not a bad model for the church. Certainly we need a leader who can handle turbulence. But most of all, we need a church where we are all honking encouragement to one another.

Hebrews 10:25

“Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”

B. Old Testament examples of unity

Tonto and the Lone Ranger were riding through a canyon together when all of a sudden both sides were filled with Native American warriors on horses, dressed for battle. The Lone Ranger turned to Tonto and asked, "What are we going to do?" Tonto replied, "What you mean 'we,' Whiteman?"

So much for unity! There are Tonto's in the local churches today who don't really care about church unity. Did you know we can have union without unity? If you tie two cats together by their tails and throw them over a clothesline they will have union but they won't have unity. God wants us to follow His instruction manual so we can possess true unity among the saints. Snowflakes are one of nature's most fragile things, but just look at what they can do when they stick together!

There are several Old Testament passages that address the subject of the importance of unity. Allow me to share a few of them in this next section of our study. The Bible does have a lot to say on the matter of church unity.

Proverbs 6:16-19, the old forgotten Proverb, still rings out this truth:

“These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: A proud look (disdainful look – looking at others in an unworthy way which elevates oneself), a lying tongue (deceitful tongue), and hands that shed innocent blood (deadly hand), An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations (depraved heart - wicked plans or plots against others), feet that be swift in running to mischief (delinquent foot – a person who runs to do evil actions against others), A false witness that speaketh lies, (dishonest witness) and he that soweth discord among brethren (deliberate divider).”

The person that sows discord is the type of person who stirs up trouble among the brethren as he misrepresents the truth to others.

The striking thing here is that God ranks the one who causes divisions among brethren with those who are murderers, liars, and those who commit perjury! God hates the sin of discord or division among His people. Dearly beloved, let us not sow discord among the brethren by our bitter attitudes, resentments, and sour spirits. God has not called us to these things. He has called us to a higher and holier life that brings unity among the saints.

Psalm 133:1-3

“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore.”

This Old Testament passage has a beautiful portrayal of the unity that should exist between God's saints as they meet and function together.

In this text we see several observations about church unity.

1. The beauty of unity (Ps. 131:1-3a).

The beauty of unity is seen in two ways:

1. By its declaration (vs. 1).

Let's look at this declaration.

a. It's a sight to behold (1a).

The young fellow said of his girlfriend, “She is a sight to behold.” Behold! This means to pause, gaze upon, and contemplate the beauty of unity among the saints. We are to allow the truth of unity to captivate us and take our breath away much like a wild ride at an amusement park. When the saints or brethren dwell together in unity it's a beautiful sight to behold. Nothing can be more beautiful from a spiritual perspective than God's people dwelling together in unity. It is God's rare and exotic plant. Unity among brethren is a sight to

behold! David was captivated with this truth about the unity that can exist between the brethren. He wants us to know how wonderful it is to see the saints dwelling together in unity. He wants us to know that this is the most beautiful picture that we can offer up to God and before a world without God. Unity is not something we are to take for granted. It is a blessing from the Lord.

Charles Spurgeon said this about beholding unity:

“It is a wonder seldom seen, therefore behold it! It may be seen, for it is the characteristic of real saints—therefore fail not to inspect it! It is well worthy of admiration; pause and gaze upon it!”

b. It’s a scene of bliss (1b).

The words “good” and “pleasant” speak of something that is delightful, blissful, sweet, lovely, and agreeable. The harmony that exists among God’s saints is something that is delightful and lovely in God’s sight. It’s also something that brings delight among the saints as they gather together for fellowship. The atmosphere of the church meeting or assembly cannot be a pleasant meeting place when God’s people possess cantankerous spirits and create clicks that are against one another.

Some things are good for us but not pleasant. Some of you are thinking about brussel sprouts. They are not too pleasant. Other things are pleasant but not good for us such as a hot fudge Sunday smothered with whipped cream. But we can be sure that unity among God’s people is both good and pleasant. When it comes to unity you can have your cake and eat it too! It is both good and pleasant. It’s something that brings great bliss, joy, and delight to our hearts.

Unity is good and pleasant because it brings harmonious relationships between believers and creates a spirit of blessed Christian fellowship that is lacking out in the lost world. Unity strengthens our fellowship and serves as a gracious testimony to the unsaved world. The old song is true: They’ll know we are Christians by our love. When we lose our unity we lose the delight and bliss we can experience together as God’s saints.

There are three opposites of bliss or happiness.

1. Biting

Paul said in Galatians 5:15:

“But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another.”

This has been called Christian cannibalism! The saints get talking about the inconsistencies in the lives of others and they begin to bite and devour other people with words of backbiting and gossip. In the end, this ultimately creates an atmosphere of disunity and discouragement among the saints. Our bliss can quickly turn into biting when we allow the old nature to overtake us. A good and pleasant atmosphere of unity can only be maintained in any church when the saints stop devouring one another and when they meet together under the umbrella of truth and humility.

2. Bitterness

James 5:9 says:

“Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned: behold, the judge standeth before the door.”

The word “grudge” (stenazo) means to sigh, murmur, groan or grumble. The word suggests an inward feeling of bitterness, animosity, and smothered resentment toward another person which normally results in an outward display of gossip and slander against them. James is hitting the nail right on the head. The groaning and grumbling spirit of these saints was causing them to lash out at one another with words of critical judgment and gossip. Their groaning spirit was the source of their unwarranted attacks on other Christians. It was an inward feeling of bitterness, criticism, and faultfinding that overran their hearts which eventually caused them to say and do unkind things toward other brethren.

After the Civil War, Robert E. Lee visited a Kentucky lady who took him to the remains of a grand old tree in front of her house. There she bitterly cried that its limbs and trunk had been destroyed by Federal artillery fire. She looked to Lee for a word condemning the North or at

least sympathizing with her loss. After a brief silence, Lee said, "Cut it down, my dear Madam, and forget it."

The same must be true regarding our inward resentment we might have in our heart toward others. We must cut it down or else it will destroy our own personal lives and hinder the unity of church ministry and life.

James 4:11

"Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge."

Grudging leads to gossiping. Bitterness leads to biting! When one decides to "speak evil" of someone else they will gossip about them behind their back. James is talking about the gossiping judge. The kind of evil speaking that James is condemning is that of a critical and faultfinding spirit which constantly seeks to downgrade others, slander others with false charges, defame others, and tear down their character, credibility, and testimony by talking behind their backs.

James is not condemning the righteous judgment (John 7:24), exhortation (Heb. 3:13), and rebuke (2 Tim. 4:2) of God's people but a critical gossiping type of judgment that is unnecessary, unwarranted, and unkind. Even when Christians do speak they must speak "the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). James is referring to a mindless, thoughtless, careless, complaining, critical, condemning, defaming, derogatory, and oftentimes untrue backbiting speech that is directed against other believers.

We need to remember that we will be judged for our own gossiping and critical spirit against others ("lest ye be judged" – James 5:9). When a judge enters a courtroom, a reverent hush moves over the audience. In a similar way we must remember that another Judge (Jesus Christ) is waiting at the door and is someday going to return to judge those who are nitpicking, backbiting, and gossiping against other believers ("behold, the judge standeth before the door" – James 5:9). It would be very embarrassing if the Lord would come back while you are sitting in judgment on someone else. You would

suddenly find yourself in His presence with Him judging you. Here comes the Judge! Dear friend, we must all bow down before the judgment seat of Christ.

We are never told to pick on people and exploit their own inconsistencies through gossip. Instead, we must learn to be patient and prayerful in the work of the Lord and keep our own lives unspotted from the world (James 1:27).

Beware of bitterness! It leads to gossip and all kinds of rivalry in church ministry.

Hebrews 12:15

“Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.”

When a person has a bitter heart they will look for many things that are wrong in the church and amplify them. Bitterness is the root of all disunity. Out of bitterness flows the other sins of jealousy, gossip, backbiting, faultfinding and lovelessness. Paul warns about the root of a bitter spirit that begins to grow and fester in our hearts. Bitterness starts as a root and then grows into fruit which manifests itself in divisive among the saints.

The Greek word “fail” means to fall short or come behind. It was used of a person who was left behind in a race and who has failed to reach the intended goal. Paul is saying that when we allow bitterness to invade our heart we do not allow God’s inward teaching grace to work in our hearts and lives (Titus 2:11-12). As a result, instead of reaching the goal of peace with others and holiness (Heb. 12:14) we reach another end which is a bitter spirit. Thus, God’s grace does not fail us, but we fail God’s grace, because we do not allow His transforming grace to operate in our lives. When God’s grace is at work in our heart and lives we will seek to promote peace instead of division within assembly life. However, when bitterness builds up in our hearts we become divisive in our outlook and actions. The result of a bitter spirit ultimately affects others in the assembly (“many be defiled”). This is the tragic result of bitterness. It usually defiles others and can defile many within the congregation.

How are others defiled with our bitter spirit? They become defiled by our complaints and our doubts. They also become defiled by our rivalry spirit and sour spirit that we possess. Bitterness effects church unity. Whenever there is bitterness love is trying to be choked out of the assembly. Many times your own sin will have an indirect effect on others. Sour spirits have a way of affecting others. This is especially true of the sin of bitterness. Nothing on earth consumes a man and ministry more quickly than resentment or bitterness.

Thomas Hood said:

“An irritable person is like a hedgehog rolled up the wrong way, tormenting himself with his own prickles.”

3. Blight

Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 11:17:

“Now in this that I declare unto you I praise you not, that ye come together not for the better, but for the worse. For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it.”

When our meetings are no longer “for the better, but for the worse” because of divisions then our meetings have become a blight instead of a blessing. When Christians are divided, devouring one another, and determined to selfishly have their own way, it’s then that the gathered meetings become something that tear Christians down instead of build them up. When congregations are divided they do not come together “for the better, but for the worse.” Their meetings are schismatic, controversial, and discouraging.

If I were to hand out a piece of paper to every person today and tell them to write down on the paper three things that they dislike about every person in the assembly, we would probably become like sharks in a feeding frenzy! God does not want us to dwell on the negatives of others but unite together under the umbrella of truth, forgiveness, love, and patience. The fundamental church has a stand they must keep as a separated Bible believing church. They will also practice certain separated standards for the sake of purity and wholesome fellowship in the local church. However, if we are not careful we can begin to nitpick and gossip about the inconsistencies in other people

which in return will tear any ministry apart. We can begin to hold grudges against others and stick our nose up at others. When we do this unity is broken.

Let us read the the words of Psalm 133:1 once again:

“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!”

During Vacation Bible School one year a pastor’s wife had an experience with her primary class that she says she will never forget. Her class was interrupted on Wednesday about an hour before dismissal when a new student was brought in. The little boy had one arm missing, and since the class was almost over, she had no opportunity to learn any of the details about his life. She was very nervous and afraid that one of the other children would comment on his handicap and embarrass him. There was no opportunity to caution them, so she proceeded as carefully as possible. As the class time came to a close, she began to relax. She asked the class to join her in their usual closing ceremony which called for the use of both arms. "Let's make our churches," she said. "Here's the church and here's the steeple, open the doors and there's..." The awful truth of her own actions struck her. The very thing she had feared that the children would do, she had done. As she stood there speechless, the little girl sitting next to the boy reached over with her left hand and placed it up to his right hand and said, "Davey, let's make the church together." This should be our prayer today. Let's make church together!

c. It's a sense of belonging (1c)

Please notice the emphasis on “dwelling together” (Ps. 133:1) as a unified group. This speaks of a sense of belonging and suggests that we can sit down at the table and have a nice quiet meal together without any arguments and complaining about the food. My friend, I don't know about you, but I don't want to come to church and get indigestion! Many times the saints do not dwell together at the table of fellowship, and possess a sense of belonging, simply because they are all bent out of shape about something or someone and have allowed a bitter spirit to invade their hearts. Let's stop all of this carnality and act like mature and spiritual Christians!

2. By its description (Ps. 133:2).

David uses two illustrations to describe the unity of brethren.

a. A ritual illustration

David begins to describe unity by illustrating it from the practice of pouring oil over Aaron's head, which eventually ran down through his beard and on to his garments. This is a very significant ritual which had spiritual overtones. You will remember that Aaron was the first high priest of Israel who would perform the sacrifice that God required. Olive oil was poured upon his head, which in return would run down through His beard and right down to the bottom of his garments. This oil was used as a way to ceremonially anoint Aaron and express that He was God's man for this priestly position. Under the Mosaic Law persons and things set apart or consecrated for sacred purposes were anointed with the holy anointing oil.

Exodus 29:5-7

“And thou shalt take the garments, and put upon Aaron the coat, and the robe of the ephod, and the ephod, and the breastplate, and gird him with the curious girdle of the ephod: And thou shalt put the mitre upon his head, and put the holy crown upon the mitre. Then shalt thou take the anointing oil, and pour it upon his head, and anoint him.”

The practice of Aaron the high priest being anointed is very rich in its symbolism and typology of Christ. But how does the flowing oil over Aaron's head, beard, and garments speak of unity among the brethren? Here is the answer. Before the oil ran down to the skirts of his garment it flowed onto the breastplate where the names of all 12 tribes were displayed (Ex. 28:15).

Exodus 28:29

“And Aaron shall bear the names of the children of Israel in the breastplate of judgment upon his heart, when he goeth in unto the holy place, for a memorial before the Lord continually.”

This is very important to understand. The oil running down over the names of the twelve tribes of Israel symbolized the unity of the nation in worship under their consecrated priest. What a beautiful picture and illustration this is for unity. In a similar way today, God expects us to be unified as His people under the pastor who is a New Testament priest, so we can represent a unified body of believer's for the Lord in a given area. There can be no mistake about it. The picture of oil flowing down over Aaron's beard and garments, where the names of the tribes appeared, became a wonderful ritual illustration from the sacred realm of how the people were to be consecrated together, under the high priest, and unified in both truth and practice.

I wonder if the oil is running in your church today? God wants us to be consecrated together as a New Testament body of believers under the leadership in the local assembly. God wants us to let the oil run freely so that we can say, "We are in this together!" We need to let the oil run down and reaffirm our oneness in this work and ministry for the Lord and not allow the devil to get a beachhead in our personal lives and God's work.

Ephesians 4:27

"Neither give place to the devil."

I get tired of the devil's work. What we need today is God's work! We don't want to allow the devil to get a foot in the door and give him a starting place to work. In other words, we are not to give up any territory in our heart to Satan. Our heart must be "off limits" to the devil's work. It must be roped off to his ruling and working.

At our Ephrata Fair ministry we have a parade that is normally watched by some one hundred thousand people. Many people will mark off certain areas of the street by setting up their chairs and then putting a rope from chair to chair in order to save the seats. Well, this is exactly what we must do to our hearts. We must rope off our hearts and not allow Satan to have a starting point in our lives. Keep the rope up! Don't let down your guard. Unity is too good and pleasant to lose!

We can be sure that various signs of disunity will occur when the devil get's a beachhead in people's lives and as he attempts to put a

foot inside the church. Let us not allow Satan to begin his disruptive and devilish work in our midst. Every church must take their stand against the devil and his work of bitterness, jealousy, gossip, backbiting, faultfinding, and unforgiveness.

b. A natural illustration

Psalm 133:3

“As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore.”

David now compares the unity mentioned in verse one to the dew that covers the mountains. He is now using an illustration from nature. The dew of Hermon in the south and the dew in the mountains around Jerusalem (Zion) was heavy dew that completely blanketed the mountains and became refreshing and invigorating to the people. This dew that covered the entire mountainous terrain was a beautiful picture or illustration of the unity that should exist among the brethren. We are to be one in doctrine, purpose, and goals. As it covered the mountains like one huge blanket the Psalmist saw this as a picture of unity and oneness among the brethren. The dew was also a source of cool, invigorating, and refreshing moisture. This too was an illustration that comes from unity. True unity among God’s people is like a refreshing dew that covers the mountains like a blanket. Worshipping together in the unity of truth, holiness, and love is comparable to a refreshing experience where God can be glorified and the saint’s edified.

When you have the privilege of serving in a local church where unity is practiced it will be a wonderful experience. You will find yourself refreshed and prepared to go out and serve the Lord. The meeting of God’s people should not be a time of turmoil and fighting. Instead, it should be like refreshing dew that has fallen in the mountains of Zion. This can only come about when absolute truth is proclaimed and followed, when God’s holiness and order is maintained in the assembly, and when the saints stop gossiping and devouring one another because of their petty differences, preferences, and carnal bitterness.

During a church worship service, the pastor invited all the young children to join him near the altar for one of those "Children's Moments Sermon." One day, with seven small children in attendance, he spoke about the ingredients required to make a church unified, using a chocolate chip cookie as an example. He explained to the children that, as with a cookie requiring ingredients such as sugar and eggs, the church needed certain ingredients such as truth, love, and kindness to unify a church congregation. Holding a cookie aloft, he asked, "If I took the chocolate chips out of this cookie, what would I have?" The pastor expected a child to answer "disunity" However, a shy six-year-old raised his hand and said, "Six less grams of fat," he replied.

2. The blessing of unity (Ps. 131: 3b)

Psalm 133:3 concludes:

"...for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore."

David finishes this Psalm by saying that every blessing, whether it's dew, unity, or life itself, flows forth from the place called Zion ("for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore"). As David closes out this Psalm He highlights earthly Zion (Jerusalem), the place of God's dwelling, as the source of all true blessing, even the blessing of unity, which this Psalm was talking about. God dwelt in Zion or earthly Jerusalem, within the temple, and it's from here that He dispensed His blessing upon His national people Israel. Here is something to think about. Hell is the source of disunity whereas Zion is the place unity originates. In other words, God's people in the Old Testament were aware that the eternal blessing of God was upon them since God dwelt in Zion their earthly city. Salvation and all of their blessings came forth from the place of God's abode. Ultimately God's blessing of unity flowed forth from the stream of Zion.

Today the blessing of the Church flows forth from the heavenly Zion where Christ is seated at the right hand of God and where we are seated in the heavenlies in Christ (Ephesians 1:3; 2:6). As we share the life of Christ up yonder in glory (Col 3:1) we can possess a spirit of forgiveness, love, patience, tenderness, and humility so that we will not become a church divider but a church unifier. Zion is our only

hope for unity! The heavenly Zion is the source of our unity as we receive of the Lord's grace, humility, and power to live together in unity.

Someone has said:

"Church-goers are like coals in a fire. When they cling together, they keep the flame aglow; when they separate, they die out."

May we as God's people see the danger of disunity, disharmony, disruption and discord and be determined by God's grace and power "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3). It's only then that our times of meeting will be good and pleasant, invigorating and refreshing, as the oil that ran down Aaron's beard on to his garments, and as the evening dew on the mountains of Zion. As we practice church unity both our children and the world will know that we are Christians. My friend, I might sound like some kind of old tent preacher when I say this. But I think I will say it anyway. Let us kick the devil out and bring down the dew!

In 1765 John Fawcett was called to pastor a very small congregation at Wainsgate, England. He labored there diligently for 7 years, but his salary was so meager that he and his wife could scarcely obtain the necessities of life. Though the people were poor, they compensated for this lack by their faithfulness and warm fellowship.

Then Dr. Fawcett received a call from a much larger church in London, and after lengthy consideration decided to accept the invitation. As his few possessions were being placed in a wagon for moving, many of his parishioners came to say good-bye. Once again they pleaded with him to reconsider.

Touched by this great outpouring of love, he and his wife began to weep. Finally Mrs. Fawcett exclaimed, "O John, I just can't bear this. They need us so badly here." "God has spoken to my heart, too!" he said. "Tell them to unload the wagon! We cannot break these wonderful ties of fellowship."

This experience inspired Fawcett to write a hymn.

“Blest be the tie, that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.”