

Two Essential Elements of Biblical Unity

In light of His prayer and teaching, we conclude that Jesus desires unity among His disciples.

"May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:23).

Since Jesus desires unity, we too ought to desire it and pray that His disciples are brought to complete unity. If we are to seek unity, we should first attempt to understand what Jesus had in mind when He prayed this prayer. Let us consider two essential elements of the type of unity Jesus had in mind.

The first essential element of biblical unity is love. True love for the brethren should motivate and guide our thinking. It considers our brothers as more important than ourselves. The lack of Christ-like love will always produce disunity. Sins of pride will always manifest themselves in an environment in which there is a lack of genuine Christ-like love. For example, people will tend to look after their own interests rather than those of others. Leaders will tend to view themselves as superior in some way exhibiting a controlling spirit rather than that of a serving spirit. Often, Christians lacking Christ-like love become concerned about how spiritual they appear to their brothers and sisters. Wherever pride exists, hypocrisy shows its ugly head. The type of unity Jesus has in mind is void of pride and hypocrisy. It concerns itself with the wellbeing of others. Spirit filled service is the fruit of this concern. The pursuit of a growing degree of Christ-like love within us as individuals is essential if we hope to positively impact the body of Christ for the sake of unity.

Acknowledging the great need for true, Christ-like love, let us now turn our attention to a second essential element of biblical unity. While most people think of love as THE essential element of biblical unity, the Bible teaches that truth is also an essential element of biblical unity. If we disregard truth in our pursuit of unity, we will not be able to experience the type of unity Jesus had in mind. To illustrate this, I will show that both Jesus and Paul believed that if there is a choice between truth and union "for the sake of unity," union must be cast aside in favor of truth.

Jesus said, *"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn " `a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law-- a man's enemies will be the members of his own household'"(Matthew 10:34-36).* Clearly, Jesus' idea of unity did not include unity with all men and people of all religions. On the contrary, Jesus taught that the world would hate His disciples in the same way it hated Him. The type of unity Jesus had in mind does not exist apart from truth and the righteousness it produces. To the degree that His disciples live in the light of His truth, they will experience the type of unity He desires. This type of living and resulting unity with each other also brings about persecution and hatred from the world and a clearer division from it and all for which it stands.

To further show the connection between the Word of God and true unity, let me point out that on occasion, Paul advocated division even within the church.

"If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother" (II Thessalonians 3:14-15)

In this and other passages, Paul instructs God's people to separate from others who do not submit to God's instruction (truth).

"In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us" (II Thessalonians 3:6).

"I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. 18 For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people" (Romans 16:17-18)

"But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat" (I Corinthians 5:11).

In addition, we see Paul condemning those who distort the gospel.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel--which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:6-9)

While Paul desired and prayed for true unity, he understood that such unity cannot be maintained or produced at the cost of compromising truth. Biblical unity and truth are linked together. If you separate truth, true unity becomes a counterfeit union that can only prevent true unity from happening.

We conclude that the type of unity Jesus desires for His people requires true Christ-like love and humility. This true love cannot exist at the expense of truth because true love desires purity and obedience to God's will. Biblical unity never remains silent about the presence of harmful sin and error but seeks to rid sin and error from the body. Biblical unity does not look the other way when others are teaching doctrines contrary to the gospel of Jesus. Biblical unity cannot be fabricated by compromising the truth, whether in doctrine or practice.

How do we apply these things with a heart of Christ-like love? If we are going to have a positive impact that leads to true unity, we should continuously plead with God for Him to increase our love for others and the truth. True, God-produced righteousness must be our desire. *"Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Matthew 6:33).*

To fulfill our responsibility to love others, we must value God's truth above our own ambitions and ideas. To love the brethren, we must seek their welfare above our own. Part of that responsibility may involve the giving of our financial resources. Another part of that responsibility is to speak the truth in love to them with the goal that they would be encouraged to walk in the path of righteousness. If they are drifting from that path, we must not remain silent lest they suffer great harm. If a man is believing things that are harmful, we should seek to help him see the truth so that he may be set free from destructive error and the sin that accompanies it. We cannot look the other way about sin or error. Sin and error only produce division, not unity.

In our efforts to turn people from sin and error, we must continue to love the one we seek to help and never look down on him. We must remember that he is our brother and not the enemy. The enemy is Satan and the lies that the brother is believing. So, it is possible for us to love others and consider them more important than ourselves while at the same time hating the error or sin that is harming him.