

Living In Unity

1 Corinthians 1:4-11
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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News Flash: Not All Christians Get Along! Shocking, I know, but it's true.

The Christian world is dividing itself up and taking sides. Lines have been drawn in the sand. Divisive debates and incendiary rhetoric is running rampant. Accusations abound. Name-calling and finger-pointing rule the day. Competition and power struggles for authority have become the norm.

Oh by the way, this news flash is about 2000 years old and comes from the ancient Greek port city of Corinth.

It's an erroneous myth that the Christian Church has ever been fully united at any point in its history, even when the orthodoxy police, then and now, have been out in full force. As we are all too aware, unity is a concept much easier to talk about than to put into practice – hence 2000 years of quarrelling and divisiveness within Christianity, let alone within in society itself.

Knowing how important it is to proceed with a consensus on how we define terms, especially in a religious context, here's a starting point to understanding this concept of unity. **Unity is the state or quality of being in accord and in harmony; having a singleness of purpose or action; of being joined as a whole.** And as has been stated on countless occasions, **unity is not equivalent with uniformity, where everything must be exactly the same.** For instance, there can be a state of living together in unity even when there are differences of opinion, belief and practice.

Yet, the quest to find and live in unity is, and always has been, quite a struggle. That's especially true in a culture that allows an ever-increasing amount of pluralism, as in a community of people with a variety of differences in cultural background and heritage, religious and theological perspectives, political points of views, and even social norms. And what's fascinating is that I'm not just talking about living in the United States in the 21st century, but also in what was going on in that ancient Greek town of Corinth in the 1st century. Again, this is what the apostle Paul shares in 1 Corinthians about living in unity.

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. (1 Corinthians 1:10)

Incorporating a broader historical perspective, we learn that *all* religious faith traditions have addressed this issue of seeking and experiencing unity.

From a Hindu sacred text:

May the divine create between us and strangers
A unity of hearts.
May we unite in our minds,
Unite in our purposes and
Not fight against the divine spirit
Within us.

(Atharva Veda)

From a Buddhist sacred text:

Happy is the unity of the [assembly] (Sangha).
Happy is the discipline of ones so united.
(Dhammapada)

From a Baha'i text:

O contending people and kindreds of the earth!
Set your faces toward unity,
And let the radiance of its light shine upon you.
(Baha'u'llah)

From a Jewish sacred text:

How good and pleasant it is
When kindred dwell together in unity!
(Psalm 133:1)

The ancient struggle of how to find unity in the midst of diversity continues to be among our most pressing modern struggles, and especially within religious institutions. But **in the earliest days of the ancient Christian church, before theological positions were engraved in granite** in creeds like the Nicene Creed, which was written in 325 CE when Emperor Constantine wed Christianity to the Roman Empire, **Christian faith was not first and foremost a matter of right belief, which is the literal definition of the word 'orthodoxy'. Instead, Christian faith was more of a new way of life and the formation of a new way of being and living together in community.**

This new way of relating to God and one another was a way marked by love, compassion, justice, forgiveness, peace, and service to others. This particular approach to Christianity, in a nutshell, is what modern progressive Christianity is working hard to restore. **We are working to redirect the basic understanding of Christianity back toward living a particular way of life, that ultimately our actions and attitudes are more important than our own personal or denominational opinions and beliefs,** as important as they may be.

We know, however, that there is a strong resistance to this approach by many traditionalists, some of whom try to force others to submit to their opinions and beliefs, labeling us as heretics – or at least 'not true believers' – if we don't fall into line. So let me say it again, we should not confuse unity with uniformity, as many others have mistakenly done in their approach to Christianity. In fact, **being of the same mind and purpose does not require us to formulate our theology and politics in identical terms.**

Years ago, the World Council of Churches developed the slogan, "Doctrines divide, but service unites." Recently, Tulsa Metropolitan Ministries (TMM), of which College Hill is a member, adopted a similar slogan, **"We need not believe alike to love alike."**

Although doctrines do have their appropriate place and purpose in the life and history of the church, it seems next-to-impossible to reach full agreement on certain (perhaps most) church doctrines. That's why the Presbyterian denomination itself has historically and consistently refused to provide a specific, defined list of "essential tenets" that we all must agree upon. In the last decade, however, there has been an organized effort on the part of some very conservative Presbyterians to do exactly that, to define in no uncertain terms what one *must believe* in order to call themselves a true Presbyterian. In my opinion, it's as if some want us to return to the theological understandings of

Presbyterianism in the 1600s. **Believing all things evolve, however, including our theological assumptions, I think going backwards is the wrong direction.**

Those efforts to impose dogma onto the entire denomination thankfully failed. But in doing so many of those congregations that were aligned with such dogmatic and absolute orthodox positions, including Kirk of Hills Presbyterian Church here in Tulsa, have severed their relationship the denomination. Others are still nervously waiting to see how things play out before they make a final decision of whether or not they can live in unity within the Presbyterian Church (USA). Needless to say, we're all watching the current debate of marriage equality very closely.

Speaking of diversity, in spite of all the spiritual cliques that formed around different leaders in that church in Corinth, Paul goes on to affirm their diversity, making it clear that the variety of gifts and ministries they possess come directly from God. **Unity, then, is more about mutual forbearance (to use a historical Presbyterian phrase), and it involves the genuine desire to build respectful, trusting relationships among persons with varied perspectives and views.**

Last Sunday I talked about how this congregation (and any congregation for that matter) has a corporate soul – a way of living and being that helps define its identity, ethos, character and culture. Yet even with that, we should be fully aware that there are many differences among us here at College Hill, including theologically, politically and socially. Yet, **instead of trying to convert others who act or think differently from ourselves to “our way,” which is still a common practice within Christianity, we have chosen instead a different path – a path that nudges and challenges us to live together in a sense unity in the midst of our diversity and differences.**

I think we inherently understand that no single faith tradition (like Christianity), no single denomination (like Presbyterian), no single congregation (like College Hill), nor any one person (like you or me), has the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? Following this line of thought, then, perhaps unity begins by recognizing that every person, every congregation, every denomination, and even every faith tradition has their strengths AND the weaknesses; their truth AND their prejudices; their clear sense of vision AND their blind spots, and their advantages AND their limitations. That's why we, as the human community, need each other.

Referring specifically to Christianity, the apostle Paul goes out of his way to make the point that in Christ we are equals in the sight of God, yet different – different in belief and practice, yet all part of the Body of Christ. Perhaps we can work toward unity, then, by recognizing that **our differences, rather than being used as a tool to divide and alienate us from one another, are to be appreciated as treasured gifts to offer each other and the world.**

Beyond just a church context, I invite you to be thinking this week of how any of this may apply to your personal and family life, your work or school life, and especially in your approach towards others with whom you disagree. And remember these verses that open 1 Corinthians, for they are both a proclamation of Christian faith as a new way of life, and an invitation to enter into the difficult but essential task of addressing the conflicts and differences that are part of being a people from a rich variety of backgrounds, traditions and perspectives.

Perhaps that's our call to a new way of doing and being the church in the 21st century, a way that may have less in common with the church of the 20th century and more in common with the approach toward Christianity in the 1st century.

Amen.