

# Unity Over Preference

## *Why Unity?*

Fairview Missionary Church | Angola, IN

Scripture: John 17:20-26

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How many of you have ever been frustrated because you've told your children to do something literally 100 times, and yet they still haven't processed it. Things like, "Hey, clean your room." And they say, "The room is clean. Clean the living room. Pick up your stuff. It's clean. It's fine." And you walk in and it looks like this, right? And you think to yourself, "No, you've got to pick up the trash, pick up the dishes, you know clean your bathroom counter, pick up your shoes and your socks." You say things to your children as they get older, you know like, "Hey, you don't need a 20-minute shower. 10 minutes is enough," right?

I remember getting yelled at and my sister getting yelled at as a teenager. You say things like, "Stop fighting with your brothers and your sisters." And you know you sound like a broken record, but when it still needs to be said, you don't have a choice. Sometimes the behavior, in order for it to change, you need a reminder. And sometimes those reminders come with a punishment in order for it to sink in. And no parent likes to give their kids punishment. They don't enjoy doing that.

But sometimes, the pain of the punishment reminds you, "Oh, yeah, my parents would like me to do X, Y, and Z, whatever it is." Sometimes those reminders work. And sometimes, if you were like me as a teenager or like others, sometimes those reminders just make you even more angry, right? You say, "Quit telling me. I already know about it." And personally, I believe that our sinful nature actually motivates us to intentionally not listen.

We want to do the opposite. If our parents say black, we say white. If they say jump, we don't want to. You know we just want to do the opposite of whatever they say. We do the opposite out of rebellion. Now, of course, I'm talking about everyone else's kids, not my kids, right? You guys know what I'm talking about, but I've never experienced that. You see, we often need to be reminded of things. Scripture repeats things that are important over and over again so that we will remember them.

The Israelites were told by God to build monuments as a way to remember what God had done for them as He led them out of Egypt into the Promised Land, and then they cross over the Jordan. They were to make monuments to remember. We even have reminder apps on our phone because we have so much going on we forget. And so we need a message to be sent to us to say, "Hey, remember you're supposed to do this." Today's message is going to be a reminder message.

If you've been at Fairview for any amount of time, you already probably know everything I'm going to say. Some of you may have even walked in, grabbed the bulletin, and groaned a little bit, right? Like, "Oh, no, not again. Please, we're not doing this." And you thought to yourself, "Okay, we get it, pastor. Stop talking about this topic." But I am telling you today that we still have a long way to go as a church. We have a long way to go in learning this.

And of course, I'm talking about one of our core values of unity over preference, the importance of unity. This is one of our core values, and it's not a core value because I think it should be. It's a core value because Scripture says it should be. The church is called to be unified. The idea of unity is mentioned many times in the Bible by different authors in different books. It's mentioned in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

And as we will see today, this idea of unity is so important that it was on Jesus' mind as He prayed to His Father leading up to the crucifixion. It is truly the longest prayer that we even have for Jesus recorded in Scripture. It's in John 17. If you want to open there with me, that's the prayer we're going to be in today. In John chapter 17, and don't get discouraged, his longest prayer is only 26 verses. All right?

So if you say, "Well, I can't pray for a long time," that's good. 26 verses. That's his longest prayer in all of Scripture. But we're going to see what was on his mind, what was on his heart. In those final moments of his earthly ministry, he knows his life is coming to an end. And so what is it that is on his mind as he wants to communicate with the heavenly Father? Unity truly is an integral part of all creation.

We're going to see today through Jesus' prayer that unity existed even before the creation of the world in the Godhead, in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Unity is something that God wants us to experience because when we have disunity in the church, it leaves a gaping hole in the story of Jesus.

Disunity leaves a foothold for the enemy to infiltrate the church and to cause division and hurt. The easiest way to defeat an enemy is from within. And so the enemy of our souls knows that. And so he tries to infiltrate the church to cause us to fight amongst ourselves. When we are united with Christ, we are an impregnable force.

But when we have fighting from within, there are many ways that we can be defeated. So if you haven't already, open to John 17:20. I'm going to set the stage. But before we do that, let me pray before we begin. Heavenly Father, we've gathered today, and we are all different. We have different preferences. We have different backgrounds, different family experiences, ups and downs of life.

And you have created us that way to be different. But in the midst of our differences, we are to have unity. Unity so that you can be lifted up, unity so that you can be praised. Unity so that some may come to know you as their Lord and Savior. So, Father, allow our hearts to be moldable this morning. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

In John chapter 17, where we are going to read, this is the evening that is commonly known as the Last Supper. And even if you weren't raised in church, but you went to school, you probably at least recognized this scene because of the famous painting by Leonardo da Vinci of The Last Supper. This is the last meal that Jesus would have with his disciples, with his close friends. It's on this night that Jesus would be betrayed by Judas, one of his close friends, one of his disciples.

He would be wrongfully arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, and he would be handed over to the Jewish leaders. Eventually, those Jewish leaders would hand him over to the Roman authorities so that he could be crucified. And on this final night with His disciples, Jesus knew that His ministry was coming to an end. And it's in these final moments that he is going to speak openly and honestly with them before he dies.

You see, in our final moments, as I've had the privilege of being a pastor for a few years now and spending time with families as they have watched their loved ones enter their final moments of life, you recognize right away that the family and those that are passing don't talk about things like sports and the weather or even politics. The person that is passing away wants to talk about what really matters, what is important to them.

Think about what you would want to say with your final words to your loved ones. You wouldn't care to talk about sports or the weather or things like that. How would you want them to remember you? If you knew your time was coming to an end, what would you say? It is for this reason that we often put more weight on someone's final words because they matter. And so as we are here in John chapter 17, what is Jesus going to use His final words for in this longest prayer that we have recorded for us in Scripture?

First, in this prayer in John chapter 17, we're not going to read the whole thing. We're going to start in verse 20 just for the sake of time. But at the beginning, Jesus is pouring out his heart to the Father, understanding what He has to go through, the pain that He's going to experience, not just the physical pain, but the spiritual pain. He understands what's coming, and so he prays for himself. Then as he goes on, he prays for his disciples, these men

that have been with him for the last four years, and he has invested in it as they're going to go out into the world and spread the good news of Jesus.

And so he spends time praying for them. And then finally, where we're going to pick up in verse 20, which is why I love this chapter and I love this prayer, Jesus is going to pray for you and for me. We are actually in Scripture because Jesus is going to pray for those who are going to believe in Him through the message of the disciples. So if you have put your faith in Jesus Christ, He is lifting you up in this prayer. Check this out. John chapter 17:20.

Jesus says, "My prayer is not for them alone," referring to the disciples. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message. And what is His prayer for us? What is His desire for those that would come to know Him as their personal Savior? He says, "My prayer is that all of them may be one." Father, just as you are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.

Why? So that the world may believe that you have sent me? What is the purpose that He is praying that you and I would be one, that you and I would have unity? It's so that when the world, when those outside the body of Christ would look at us, that they would know and believe that God sent Jesus. Verse 22, "Jesus says, 'I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one.

I in them and you in me so that they may be brought to complete unity." Why? Again, he says it, "Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I want those that you have given me to be with me where I am and to see my glory, the glory that you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world." And we're going to talk about this in a little bit.

This idea of unity is more than just so that the outside world would come to know him or believe in him. This idea of unity is also because in so doing and living a life of unity with other believers, we are actually pointing out part of God's character. Verse 25, "Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me.

I have made you known to them and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them." So Jesus prays for those who will believe through the message of His disciples. That's you and me. And so we know before the creation of the world, before you and I even existed, we were on the heart of God. Isn't that awesome? He loved you before you even existed.

And his prayer is that you and I and the followers of Jesus would all be one. Notice that He doesn't pray for our health. He doesn't pray for blessing or for longevity. He doesn't even pray that we would have wisdom or for finances. These don't seem to be the most important things. These are things that you and I often pray for. But why? Why would Jesus pray that unity would be what we have?

Because it is through our unity that the world will know that God sent Jesus. It won't be through our health or our blessings or our finances. Those on the outside looking in are not going to see the blessing and the finances and whatever else that we sometimes pray for and say, "Oh, well, God must have sent Jesus because of that." But if the world will see the unity that exists inside the church, that will convince them God must have sent Jesus into this world.

The unity of the church is also to reflect the unity of the one God upon which the church is built. This idea of unity in the church presented in Scripture is this idea of unity in diversity, which protects us from one side of the coin, which often we can fall into putting an overreliance on human hierarchies in the church of trying to establish structure and power and whatever else.

And so unity protects us from that. But also on the other side of the coin, it protects us from putting too great of an emphasis on human autonomy. I'm just going to do my own thing. I'm going to be my own person. Don't worry. I just want to be separate. We can fall into that trap. Now, unity doesn't mean that we all fit into this perfect framework. It doesn't mean that we're all the same. We're still different.

Jesus wanted us to have unity in the midst of our diversity, thus showing the world that there's something more important than just our preferences or the things that we like more than other. Our unity is more important than just a witness to the world. It's deeper than that according to the prayer of Jesus. When we operate as one, even with our distinct differences, we are reflecting something of the nature of God.

Have you ever thought about that before? That before the creation of the world, we have God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. And they lived in perfect unity before the creation of the world. And this unity that existed amongst the Godhead brings joy and happiness that overflows from an eternal love that's hard for us to grasp. And yet this is what Jesus wants us to experience as His church. It's meant to be a gift.

The unity that we can experience is meant to be a gift. And the unity certainly also needs to exist if we as the church are to survive the attacks and the hatred from the world and the enemy. Those of you that have been a follower of Jesus for any amount of time can probably share many stories of being attacked by others. People think you're crazy for believing what you believe. They call you a hypocrite.

They tell you, "Just let them do what they want to do," whatever it is, all of the things that we've all heard. We need to support each other and to hold each other up. The last thing that we need is to be attacked from within. Every time we talk about this idea of unity, someone will appropriately come up to me and say, "Hey, Pastor, are you suggesting that we should even have unity with everyone, even those who teach false theology?" The answer is an obvious no. I am not saying that.

So this is the first time you're hearing that message. I am not saying that we need to be united with everybody, even those that don't believe what we believe. Charles Spurgeon, the great preacher, once said, "We are to be faithful to truth. There is truth. There's foundational truth. Scriptural truth. But we are not to be of a contentious spirit separating ourselves from those who are living members of the one and indivisible body of Christ. To promote the unity of the church.

So it was obviously important for him as well. This is not new with me. Like I said, it's in Scripture. To promote the unity of church by creating new divisions is not wise. Instead, cultivate at once the love of the truth and the love of the brethren. They go hand in hand. Love the truth. Love your brothers and sisters as well. We are to be faithful to the truth. Let me give you some examples, just so you know. I mean, these are very foundational truths of our Christian faith.

Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary. That's a foundational truth in Scripture. Jesus was 100% God and 100% man. I can't explain it to you in a great way, which is why I don't preach on that, but it's in Scripture. 100% man, 100% God. That's what it says. Jesus was sinless. He was perfect. That's why he could be the sacrifice that takes away the sins of the world. Scripture obviously teaches that Jesus died and rose back to life, thus defeating sin and death.

And that's the hope upon which our faith is founded. These are some of the foundational truths. You need to know just because I say unity over preference, I do not mean unity over conformity. Unity does not mean that we need to conform to what everybody else believes. There is truth. And as much as I wish that Scripture was all black and white and that everything was just spelled out exactly the way it is, and we know the answer to all of our questions, that's not the case.

There are some things that are difficult that seem a little more gray, and we go, "Okay, let's talk about these things. Let's discuss these things. Share why you believe from Scripture what you believe. And I'll share what I believe. But if we are going to have unity over our preferences, it certainly requires courage and commitment. You must be willing to have the hard conversations with people. You must be willing to be flexible.

You must know why you believe what you believe so that you can engage in an appropriate conversation so you can share with others. Unity is essential for two reasons, according to Jesus' prayer. One, because it's a witness to the world of who God is, and two, it reflects the character and very nature of God. And so the application question for today is, what are you sowing with your life?

Are you sowing seeds of unity as you interact with other believers and followers of Jesus Christ? Or are you sowing seeds of disunity because of superficial issues that are really just preference? And you know some of these superficial issues. I always use the ones that are easy to joke about, but there are other superficial issues. But people like to argue over music style and preaching style about the person that's upfront and how they talk and where they talk and how long the message is.

There's some people that I've talked with that say, "Well, what Bible translation do you use?" And if you don't use King James Version or if you don't use NIV or NLT, they're like, "Well, I'm never coming back to your church again." These things that cause division amongst us. All you have to do is go on YouTube. I encourage some of you this afternoon. Go on YouTube this afternoon. And I want you to type in this phrase false teachers and see what comes up. False teachers. Now, I'm going to intentionally go past this really fast because some of these may be false teachers and some may be good.

I just found it on the internet, okay? I didn't watch this video. But there are tons of other believers that are knocking down other believers. Look at this one that I found. Why every single Christian Bible teacher is misleading you. That's pretty promising, right? Everybody that's trying to teach you the Bible, they're just misleading you. They're all false teachers. And I know that you're not going to pay attention to a word I say because you're going to look at every picture up there, all right? I tried to make them small. Just know that there's good and bad and everybody in between, all right? False teachers.

Again, some of this may be true. I've not listened to all the messages. I don't even know half of these people on the screen. But we are way too quick to judge and to condemn. It's way too easy to cause disunity in the church by putting out a video or posting something and saying, "Don't ever listen to what a person says, that person, this person, whatever." So let me give you just a quick rule, all right? A quick rule.

If someone on YouTube is bashing someone else's church or another preacher or another person, and that church, preacher, or person doesn't have a voice in the conversation, I would turn it off. If it's just one person bashing another person, even though what they're saying may be true, okay? I get it. There are false teachers out there. I get it. I understand. But if that person doesn't even have the opportunity to defend themselves or to share why they believe what they believe, I would just encourage you to turn it off.

What does an unbeliever think as they're watching this and they read something like this, "Why every single Christian Bible teacher is misleading you?" And they go, "That's why I don't go to church." That's why I don't want to read the Bible because it's just going to mislead me. And good people are thrown in with others that are maybe not good and our false teachers and everybody. Again, if you want to find something that will prove you shouldn't listen to somebody, you'll find it.

I don't think there's one person ever that has preached the gospel in the last century that doesn't have somebody that's posting something on them about how they're evil or bad or wrong or whatever else. This is the disunity that exists in the church. And how do I know this? Because it's even happened to me. And I'm nothing like these guys, all right? They don't have any idea who I am. And so it was last July. Somebody sent this to me or I wouldn't even have seen it on Facebook.

They said, "Interesting sermon today at Fairview Missionary Church in Angola." The pastor said that Christians need to be ready to give an answer if asked about their faith, but it is rude and wrong to bring up the gospel. Do you guys remember that message? Yeah, I don't. I don't remember it. I don't remember saying that. If I did say that, it's certainly not what I believe. I don't think it's wrong to bring up the gospel. I do think it's rude if you try to shove it down somebody's throat and they've told you, "Hey, please step away." I don't know what I said.

I don't know if this person was just taking it out of context. And so I was appreciative that someone sent this to me. And so I wrote back to this person, and I intentionally crossed out his name because I don't want you hating him. I don't even really think I know him. If you're here this morning, I'd love to talk with you. But I think it's a pastor down in Fort Wayne somewhere. For whatever reason, he was up at our church that day. And so I wrote

back on his Facebook post and said, "Hey, if that's what you interpreted from the message, that's not what I meant to say. I'd love to have a conversation with you." I wrote again a couple of days later because I didn't hear anything, and he'd obviously been on Facebook posting other things.

So I wrote back and said, "I'd love to talk with you." I never heard from him. So was his intention in sharing this? I don't know. Was his intention to actually try to help me become a better follower of Jesus and to bring unity in the church if he wasn't even willing to have a conversation with me? Or what was his purpose in doing this if he won't even have a conversation with me? How does this help the church? What are others thinking when they read something like this? Because, yes, sometimes things can be taken out of context.

If any of you have ever spoken publicly, you should be afraid for your life because anything can be taken out. You say one little sentence and they pull that out and they go, "Oh, look, this is what this person believes." But sometimes, maybe I do say something that's wrong from the stage. I would love to have somebody confront me on it so that we could talk through it, and then I could apologize. I could get up the next Sunday and go, "Hey, you know what? Someone showed me. Man, I said this and I was wrong." But if you're just throwing out little stuff, if you're just throwing out things, it's just you're trying to light a fire.

Scripture is very clear that we are to stand on the truth, but not at the expense of unity when it has to do with preferential things. The apostle Paul even says, "Listen to the Galatian church. If you keep biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other." He's talking to the church.

We are very good at biting and devouring each other. We can all point out things that someone else said or did that's wrong or whatever else we don't agree with. And God calls us to unity so that those outside the church would notice something is different and give praise to God and so that we become more like Christ, understanding that unity existed before the creation of the world in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

So may we continue to strive for unity? Let me pray. Heavenly Father, I pray that as a church, and not just this church physically that's present here, but as the church, your body, your bride, that we would have unity not just for the sake of unity, but so that we can point others towards you, that we can lift you up and share with others how amazing and awesome you are.

Thank you for your grace. Thank you for loving us where we're at. And in Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.