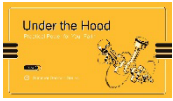


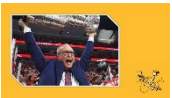
How Do We Build Unity?

Under the Hood #2 | July 7, 2024 | 8:00, 9:30, 11:00 AM | Steve Howell



Intro: Paul Maurice

As most of you know, I'm a big hockey fan. And for a hockey fan, the biggest moment of the year is when a team wins the championship and hoists the best trophy in the world – the Stanley Cup.



Last week, I watched the Florida Panthers defeat the Edmonton Oilers in seven games. During the celebration, in between shots of players taking their turn with the Cup, the coverage cut to interviews with different people on ice. I was struck by one in particular: Panthers' head coach, Paul Maurice. He was visibly moved by the moment (his first win after 30 years of coaching), yet all he could do was talk about the team. And in subsequent interviews, that theme kept going. I'd never listened much to Coach Maurice before, but his sincerity caught my attention. In the press conference afterwards, he said something pretty deep.



Watch clip from: 1:55-2:40

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ihCiUI1G-k&t=161s>

"You don't win a Stanley Cup, you share it."

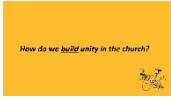
In the aftermath of victory, the one thing that he took away was that this was not a *prize*...it was an *experience* he got to share with his hockey family. It was something that **united** them not only in the pursuit of the championship but in the achievement of it.



That glimpse of unity resonated with me, because it mirrors what I want to find here in *this* gathering of Christian saints. We gather together as a church, and we have our own victories to celebrate – great moments when things go well (ex: sesquicentennials, baptisms – like the three scheduled for today!). But, what matters more is what happens *together*...when it happens with **unity**.

That is the real-world improvement I want to discuss with you in today's sermon. Our church *needs* unity, and it doesn't just happen. We have to build it.

Recap



This morning, we are moving to the second area in our “**Under the Hood**” series. Last week we talked about *listening* to God, and I hope you were able to put some of those *specific, real-world* tips into practice as you tried to hear His voice.

Today, knowing how important it is to be *together*, we’re going to ask the question,

“**How do we build unity in the church?**”

Some of our very best times in life happen when we are united with others and work together for a common goal.

Unity Under the Hood: Belts



If you’ll stick with the engine metaphor for a moment, I can’t help but think about **serpentine belts** when go “under the hood” and talk about unity.

When you look at an engine, the serpentine belt is that rubber belt that ‘snakes’ its way around different components. The power from the engine is transferred via the belt to other systems in the car, such as the alternator that keeps the electrical system going or the power steering pump so you can easily turn the wheel or the A/C compressors to keep you cool.

Even though none of those systems work directly together, the belt ensures that they are all connected to the same source of power. The shared belt doesn’t mean everything works exactly the same or at the same speed...but it does mean that each part can now work in relation to the rest. United.

A Personal Example of Unity

Hopefully, that analogy helps. But if you relate more to people than to engines, let me share one of my own stories of unity (or re-share, for some of you).



A few years back, I had the opportunity to speak at a conference that a ministry friend of mine was organizing. His ministry had a pretty solid following and had developed a strong track record of well-attended conferences. However, this conference was an experiment – rather than targeting the typical audience of their ministry (old, white, established Christians), the target was younger, more diverse and less connected to the faith.

I showed up in Texas to teach along with a handful of other guest speakers, and we got ready for worship on this opening night of a Friday-Saturday conference. The venue was set – a clean, modern church that could seat 700+ in the worship space. Multiple cameras on and ready to record. Greeters with programs

stationed by the doors. Instruments plugged into the amps. Singers voices warmed up and ready to harmonize. It was time to start...

...and no one showed up.

My friend and I were looking out from behind the stage and scanning the seats to see the audience, and there was literally no one. (Correction, three people related to the band were sitting stage left).

To this day, I don't know why no one showed. It was advertised. It was well-organized. It was covered in prayer.

But it was empty.

You would think that our group would be demoralized (and to a degree, we were). But rather than sit and sulk, we pressed on. The cameras were there, so we could at least record the presentations for future use. And the band was there, so why not worship? They began playing and singing, and the guest speakers and I sat in the front row and praised God.

GOD was the audience that night, and it was probably one of the most powerful times of worship I've ever experienced.

Each of us were united in our desire to praise God, regardless of the outcome. It was brief, and it was odd. But it was powerful. We had a singular focus. And despite never getting that group of guys together again, I still feel connected to them through this experience – a preview of what it will be like in heaven (with the addition of a few million voices!).

That was one experience of unity for me.

For you, it might have been a **team** that you belonged to, or a **work** environment where you all meshed, or a **Girl Scout** troop, or a **construction project**, or a **neighborhood** where everyone got along and helped each other out. You can identify with the *comradery*, the *purpose*, and the *satisfaction* that comes with it.

It is a blessing to be united, especially while pursuing a godly agenda!

"How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!"
(Psalm 133:1, NIV)

But it isn't always easy. It takes work!

Why? Unity is **unnatural**.

Challenges to Unity

The very reason we value unity is because we recognize how rare unity can be! Too often we find ourselves in situations where things are out of sync, where there is division and discord. Disunity can be caused by many things.

"How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!"
Psalm 133:1, NIV

Challenges to Unity



We Have Different Preferences

Sometimes it is a simple matter of taste. We have different preferences.

Will you play a simple game of “either/or” with me? Raise your hand for one of the two choices I give you. Ready?

- Vanilla or Chocolate? (Vanilla? Chocolate?)
- Summer or Winter? (Summer? Winter?)
- Tent or Hotel Room? (Tent? Hotel Room?)
- Hymns or K-LOVE? (Hymns? K-LOVE?)
- Biden or Trump (That’s right...neither! 😊)

You saw the results. No choice had full agreement. No choice appealed to everyone. And the allies you discovered on one issue became the enemies you uncovered in the next!

We take those preferences seriously. Sometimes, too seriously. And when our preferences offend, they make unity hard.

“An offended friend is harder to win back than a fortified city. Arguments separate friends like a gate locked with bars.” (Proverbs 18:19, NLT)

We Have Different Experiences

Another source of disunity is experience.

I had a conversation recently with a guy who was sharing his story. He talked about some bad choices he made coming out of high school that landed him in prison. I listened intently as he described it, but I had a hard time relating. Somehow, my time at Bible college studying the Bible in New Testament Greek doesn’t overlap with skimming with one eye on a Gideon’s Bible while keeping the other trained on the guy from the Mexican cartel he’s sharing a cell with!

When we have different experiences, it is hard to find common ground.

Remember the interaction between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15? After their first mission trip together, they discuss going for round #2.

“After some time Paul said to Barnabas, “Let’s go back and visit each city where we previously preached the word of the Lord, to see how the new believers are doing.” Barnabas agreed and wanted to take along John Mark. But Paul disagreed strongly, since John Mark had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in their work.” (Acts 15:36–38, NLT)

Barnabas had family experiences with John Mark that led him to deem John Mark trustworthy. Paul had only one experience and it went badly (see Acts 13:13)!

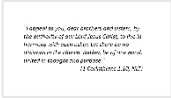
The different experiences led them to draw different conclusions and to take opposite sides of the debate.



We're Fighting the Wrong Enemy

Sometimes the source of disunity is ourselves!

We know that disunity should *never* impact the church, right?



"I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose." (1 Corinthians 1:10, NLT)

But that ideal is so hard to reach at times!



I was reading an article from a woman who had gone through a church split in a South Korean congregation planted for Americans living there, and it captures the heartbreak of infighting and disunity when it creeps into a church.

We were a motley crew of mostly expatriates. For three years we shared meals, held each other's babies, mourned each other's losses, and worshiped joyfully together.

How did we fall apart so fast?

In a church this close, conflict divides families down the middle. In our case, there was no embezzlement, affair, or heresy; there were allegations that our head pastor was abusing his power—and was seizing more.

Two factions formed. People believed either the associate pastor or the head pastor. I had dear friends in both groups. When you trust people saying opposite things, it feels at once emotionally impossible and morally imperative to pick a side. I wondered, Whose story should I believe? What if I make the wrong choice?

A broken church is devastating, because it is evidence that we got focused on the wrong enemy. The church's enemy has long been identified as Satan. But when we battle internally, we have little time or energy to fight the big spiritual battles. Rather than come *together* against the Adversary, we *divide*.

In the process, unity is lost.



The Beauty of Being Unified

Unity is hard. Yet, despite the difficulty in achieving it, unity is worth pursuing!

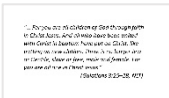
Scripture shows pictures of unity that inspire us. We see it...



...In the Disciples

Jesus chose twelve unlikely companions to follow and learn from His teaching. He picked blue-collar fishermen and white-collar tax collectors. He picked collaborators with the Roman government and zealots who wanted to overthrow Rome. He picked followers who stepped out in faith with just a word of encouragement and followers who needed solid proof before believing.

The array of disciples is a microcosm of the diversity of followers Jesus has accumulated in the years since Calvary.



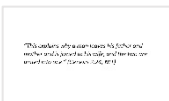
*“... For you are **all** children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:25–28, NLT)*

Jesus can unite a wide variety of people!

Not only do we find biblical unity in the disciples of Jesus, but we find it...

...In Marriage

Perhaps the most intense experience of unity comes in marriage.



“This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.” (Genesis 2:24, NLT)

God designed marriage so that men and women make each other stronger. You’ve heard the saying, “Opposites attract,” right? Well, it’s true. There are differences in personality, interest, approach, intellect, temper, and emotion. Those differences draw you in, and they are fun and exciting and natural! They can also be frustrating and infuriating and soul-crushing.

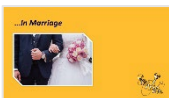
But if the couple can unite in those differences and see them as part of God’s good design, they can be united for success.

Our differences help us to excel in diverse situations. As a team, two can do better together than either ever could by him- or herself.

At times, the husband might need the wife’s attention to detail; and the wife may need her husband’s compassion. In social settings, sometimes they will need the social one to speak up, and at other times they will need the introvert to pull them back. The differences allow a married couple to help each other, to be strong where the other is weak.

Jesus can unite the two into one!

Not only do we find biblical unity in marriage, but we find it...





...In God Himself

God, the **Father**. God, the **Son**. God, the **Holy Spirit**. In His very nature, God is a picture of unity. It is His nature, yet He also wants it to be ours.

Listen to this part of Jesus' prayer from John 17.



"I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me. I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me." (John 17:20–23, NLT)

That's beautiful. That is worth pursuing!



Practical Ways to Build Unity

Unity needs to be part of our church! And it already is part of our church's plan and part of our core values. We state that one of our core values is to: *"Make every effort to be united in the Spirit and bonded together in peace"* (pulling from the words of Ephesians 4:3).

So, do we have it? Not yet.

That's not an indictment. It's just a recognition that unity doesn't *arrive*. Instead is something that must constantly be pursued and built. Just like **parenting** is never finished, or your **wardrobe** never stays fashionable, unity in the church takes ongoing effort.

So, how do we build unity?

Let me share a few tweaks to our daily routines that can help us stay united. These might be **new** (you've never heard them before) or a **review** (you've heard them a lot), but hopefully they will inspire us to stick together!

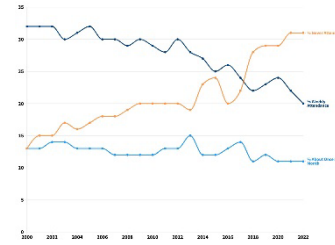
Let's go "under the hood" and take **five practical actions** to help us unite.



1. ***Come to church more frequently (> 50%)***

If you want to build unity, show up.

Church attendance is more sporadic these days, especially post-COVID. At the turn of the century¹ church attendance was more regular. You could count on larger numbers to attend every week. Now, that number has dropped.²



So make it a goal to bump up your average to 3-4 times per month...and if you have to miss, watch online!

Scriptural Foundation: *“Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.”* (Hebrews 10:24–25, NLT)

Why it works: If the majority of churchgoers are only showing up 1-2 times per month, it’s hard to stay united. It’s hard enough to stay connected and united at TCC when our church is split across three different services. It’s even harder if you are like ships passing in the night! By being here more, more people you can know. You can encourage and support one another, and you can build unity!



2. ***Use the language of family***

“You’re my brother in Christ.” “He’s my father in the faith.” We frequently talk about church members as family, and for good reason.

Scriptural Foundation: *“But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.”* (John 1:12–13, NLT)

The language of family derives from that spiritual reality. So make a conscious effort to use such terms (brother, sister, son, daughter, yokefellow) when you talk about the people in this room.

Why it works: Family is more permanent than friendships. While friendships may be strong, we’ve all cut ties with people we used to call friends. But it’s a lot harder to let go of family. You put up with more. You endure longer. You still see them and support them and make an effort even when you don’t like them. By speaking of our church relationships in those terms, we remind ourselves that we remain connected even when we have differences and conflict.

¹ That means the year 2000. Ugh. That feels wrong to say and type.

² <https://www.churchtrac.com/articles/the-state-of-church-attendance-trends-and-statistics-2023>



3. Rock, paper, scissors

Hear me out on this one. “Rock, paper, scissors” is a fast, easy way to get a randomized selection. It requires no tools (e.g. coins, dice), it has no bias (e.g. each choice can win), and cheating is obvious (e.g. the slow reaction, the unofficial moves added to the game). And a randomized solution to a contested decision can help keep us from being divisive.

Scriptural Foundation: *“Casting the lot settles disputes and keeps strong opponents apart.” (Proverbs 18:18, NIV)*

Note: *Casting lots (aka rolling the dice for randomized selection) was even part of God’s original Law. The High Priest had a pair of objects called the Umin and Thummin which were cast to settle decisions. Randomization allowed them to trust that God was guiding the process rather than allowing humans to manipulate the situation!*

Why it works: When we make everything a test of wills, it is easy for stronger personalities to dominate. By outsourcing the decision on issues that are morally indifferent (e.g. “which color paint do we use,” not “should I get drunk tonight”), we reduce the amount of arguing and the chance for abuse. We can unite behind a third-party, random choice and stay united.



4. Make a prayer “Hit List”

Are there people in this church that you don’t like? I hope so. We should want people who are rough around the edges, people who say the “F” word too often, people who struggle with drugs, people who hurt us. Why? Because such people are evidence that we as a church are sharing Jesus with those who need Him!

Do we want them to stay that way? No!!! We want them to repent of their sinful behaviors – their abusive past, their adultery, their lies, their selfishness – and be transformed by Jesus. But that doesn’t happen overnight. In the meantime, we have to coexist within the church. Coexist? Nay, unite!

If their upcoming transformation is a spiritual work of Christ, then we should go to God consistently on their behalf!

Scriptural Foundation: *“But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.” (Matthew 5:44–45, NLT)*

How it works: Make a prayer “hit list” of people that bother you at church (those who have wronged you or your friends, those who fall short in their behavior, those who push too hard) and pray for them daily. Pray for change, but also thank God that they are in church and have the chance to pursue Him! Pray that your heart would soften and that you could extend more grace than you think is possible.



5. Be willing to be wronged

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church, he challenges them on their inability to get along. Christians were bringing each other to court rather than staying united. He writes:

Scriptural Foundation: *“Even to have such lawsuits with one another is a defeat for you. Why not just accept the injustice and leave it at that? Why not let yourselves be cheated?”* (1 Corinthians 6:7, NLT)

Why it works: Why not rather be wronged? That goes against our instincts. And that's the point. You aren't called to follow your instincts; you're called to follow Christ. So what if you lose out now financially or if you were offended? I'm not minimizing the wrong or the hurt; I'm just reminding you that there are bigger priorities. There are other spiritual and eternal things at stake.

So, maybe take one for the team. Overlook an offense. Forgive a mistake. Let God be in charge of justice and you be in charge of giving Him glory. Especially when it comes to your fellow believers.

Closing

Unity is an ongoing challenge.



After our celebration of Independence Day this past week, I was thinking about how difficult unity has been for our country.

- After the Revolutionary War, the newly victorious Americans had to figure out how to live with the Tories who had been loyal to Britain.
- After the Civil War, the country had to figure out how two sides who had been trying to kill each other on the battlefield could coexist. Not to mention the problem of those who had been holding others in slavery!
- After every election, the country has to live with people who have been demonizing each other's values and beliefs.

Unity is almost impossible in those situations.



But in the church, it is possible. We will never *arrive* at unity, but we can put in the work to maintain it. Let me end with this challenge from the book of Romans. I gave you five, real-world, practical steps to take to build unity. It will take more!

“Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy

the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all! Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone. Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, "I will take revenge; I will pay them back," says the LORD. Instead, "If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads." Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good." (Romans 12:9–21, NLT)

Put all this into practice, church. Let's be united!



Prayer

Pastoral Prayer

Two ways we can stay united as a church include praying for each other and encouraging others as they take those first steps to follow Jesus.

As always, you can fill out the connection cards in your bulletin and share prayer requests with the church. Drop those off with me or in the baskets by the exit.

But today, I want to focus on people who are making the decision to follow Jesus.

_____, would you come forward?

[Share decision. Lead in Confession of Faith]

We're going to celebrate their baptisms in a moment. While they go get changed, let's remind ourselves of the Gospel message they are accepting, by standing and singing "King of Kings."

Let's stand together and sing.

[Baptism]

PRAYER REQUESTS:

Notes

“How do we build unity in the church?” (Psalm 133:1)

Challenges to Unity

We Have Different Preferences (Proverbs 18:19)

We Have Different Experiences (Acts 15:36–38)

We’re Fighting the Wrong Enemy (1 Corinthians 1:10)

The Beauty of Being Unified

...In the Disciples (Galatians 3:25-28)

...In Marriage (Genesis 2:24)

...In God Himself (John 17:20-23)

Practical Ways to Build Unity

1. Come to church more frequently (Hebrews 10:24-25)

2. Use the language of family (John 1:12-13)

3. Rock, paper, scissors (Proverbs 18:18)

4. Make a prayer “Hit List” (Matthew 5:44-45)

5. Be willing to be wronged (1 Corinthians 6:7)

Romans 12:9-21

Discussion Questions

Use the following questions based on today's sermon as a starting point for spiritual discussions with your family or a small group of Christian friends this week.

Fellowship—Relationship with a Purpose

- Describe a situation in which you felt united with a group. What kind of focus did you have? What contributed to the unity you had?

Growth—Thinking About Spiritual Matters

- What do you think are the biggest obstacles to unity in the church, in general? Which ones specifically do you find most commonly in our church?
- How do *you* contribute to disunity in the congregation? Is there anything you have handled poorly? Anything of which you need to repent?
- Who is the best peacemaker in the church? What does that person do that helps build unity within the congregation? How could you imitate their example?
- Read 1 Corinthians 1:10. Under whose authority do we unite? What does it look like to share the “same mind” and the “same purpose”?
- What are the consequences of disunity within the church? Outside the church?
- Read John 17:20–23. How does God demonstrate unity in His very nature? Why should that type of unity be mirrored in the church?
- Which of the five “practical” steps in the sermon notes* are you most likely to use? Why did you choose that answer?
 - * *Answers to the blanks under “Practical Ways to Listen”*: 1. Frequently; 2. Language; 4: Prayer; 5: Wronged.
- Brainstorm three more actions that could improve unity in our congregation.

Prayer – Taking Your Thoughts to God

- Ask for God to heal divisions in the church, especially relationships that seem fractured beyond repair. Pray that you can be used as an example of unity and a catalyst for change.