

A Church That Cherishes Unity

Ephesians 4:3

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August 2, 2026

120 years ago. 1906. Teddy Roosevelt was president, and there were 45 states in the union, Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, as well as Alaska and Hawaii still being territories. George Cohen, had just composed “You Are a Grand Old Flag.” It would be 11 years before the United States would enter WW1 and 13 years before the Green Bay Packers would start playing football. And, oh yes, 1906 was the year Chisholm Baptist was organized as a church.

It was not called Chisholm Baptist back then. It was first known as Bethphage Baptist (I don’t know where that came from), then it became First Baptist Church of Chisholm. For a short time, it was Chisholm First Baptist, and now it has been Chisholm Baptist Church since...

But though the official name has changed, this is very much the same church that started 120 years ago. Oh, a lot of changes have occurred. The worship service used to be in Swedish. Most of the songs we sing now were totally unknown 25 years ago. And a large percentage of you folks were not even part of this church five years ago. But who Chisholm Baptist church is at its core has really not changed. Two years ago, in the homecoming sermon I talked about a couple of qualities that make us who we are. I believe they have pretty much been part of this congregation for all of its 120 years.

#1 Chisholm Baptist is and has long been a Bible loving, Bible centered church. I don’t just mean our statement of faith that affirms our belief in the Bible as the inspired, authoritative, inerrant Word of God, which is certainly essential. But I think even more important is how the Bible plays a significant role for us on a weekly, even daily basis. God speaking to us through the Bible is a big part of what this church is and has always been about.

#2 Chisholm Baptist is and has long been a church characterized by being a genuine fellowship where people truly care about and care for one another. Our experience of God’s love through Jesus Christ, enables us to love each other in very practical

ways. For example, I can almost guarantee multiple people in this room have received cash, a meal, a ride, or help with childcare from someone else in the congregation during the past week. And that type of thing has been going on for decades. So, we are a Bible centered church, where people truly care about and care for one another. That is a big part of what makes Chisholm Baptist, Chisholm Baptist.

Yet, I have recently realized there is a third quality that characterizes and has characterized Chisholm Baptist Church for a long time. My way of summing it up in a couple of words is: We cherish unity. Chisholm Baptist is a church that cherishes unity.

Yes, this certainly is connected with caring for and about one another, but it goes beyond that. It reflects our belief that **Romans 12:5 we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.** Thus, any division within the body, within the church, is very painful, and something we should make every effort to avoid. This is what the Lord commands us to do through the Apostle Paul. **Ephesians 4:3 says Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.**

I also believe divisions which occur do great harm to individuals. I remember one person telling me, “When I was a teenager, every time I walked into our church (not Chisholm Baptist) some people were not talking to other people. And I was often confused about who it was okay to sit by or talk to and who I was supposed to avoid. I never felt much love there. Once I graduated, I never wanted to go to church again.”

Folks, by the grace of God, Chisholm Baptist Church has avoided being that type of church. There has never been a major division or split of which I am aware. I know over the last 33 years that I have served as the senior pastor, various individuals have left the church because they were disappointed or frustrated with something, but there was never a major division, with one group of people pitted against the other.

I believe part of the reason we have enjoyed this unity is because of the faithful prayers of people in this congregation. My old friend, Van Dieter, who died back in 2014, always prayed for “unity within our church.” Thank you to those of you who pray those types of prayers, and if you are not praying for unity within Chisholm Baptist, today might be a good time to start.

The Moravians are perhaps the oldest protestant group there is. They trace their roots back to the martyrdom of the Czechoslovakian reformer Jan Hus in 1415. They were officially organized in 1457 as “The Unity of Brethren” in Bohemia and Moravia.

Remember, Martin Luther didn’t launch the Reformation until 1517. The Moravians have a simple creed. “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.” And that really describes Chisholm Baptist both today and in the past.

Our desire for unity, our effort to keep the unity of Spirit through the bond of peace, has led us to do three things.

#1 We seek to keep our focus on the essentials, on the things that really matter. On the essential issues we require unity or agreement. To be a member of Chisholm Baptist Church one must agree with our basic beliefs and convictions. Now, we have a statement of faith, I think a very good one, but it spells our doctrinal positions on some things that are not as essential, as important, as some others.

For example, we believe in baptism by immersion, dunking people all the way under the water when they are baptized. But that is not as important as some other beliefs, and we don’t focus on it. I have never preached a sermon on why immersion is a better mode for baptism than pouring or sprinkling.

But there are three, what I consider essential beliefs. First is what I call an Orthodox or correct view of God. This is a belief we share not only with other Protestants, but with conservative Catholics and Eastern Orthodox folks as well.

We believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, in Jesus Christ, His only

begotten Son our Lord. We believe Jesus was born of the virgin, Mary, died on the cross, rose from the dead, and ascended to heaven. And we believe in the Holy Spirit. Thus, we believe in the triune God, Father and Son and Spirit, one being in three persons. We agree with Augustin that, “If you try to understand the trinity you may lose your mind, but if your refuse to believe in the trinity you will lose your soul.”

Understanding who God is and what He is like is important. That is something on which we want to focus. And for there to be unity in the church, we require basic agreement on this. That is why folks like Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons may be nice people, but don’t really fit in at Chisholm Baptist Church. We have always believed in the triune God, and always will.

Our second essential belief is that the Bible is the Word of God and our sole authority for what we believe and practice. This flows from **2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.** Whenever an issue arises, the question that should be asked is: “Well, what does the Bible say about this?” If the teaching of scripture is clear, that should be the end of any disagreement. If someone rejects the authority of scripture and says, “I don’t care what the Bible says, I have my own views,” that person doesn’t quite fit here at Chisholm Baptist Church.

This is so important in maintaining unity in a church, and our strong confidence in the Bible has been the key to unity within this congregation. While other churches have had deep divisions over issues like same-sex marriages, we have not. Our confidence in the Bible’s authority means that because it teaches marriage is to be only between a man and woman (Matthew 19:4-6), we reject same-sex marriage. Our agreement on this and on many other issues, flows from agreement that the Bible is the Word of God. If you don’t believe the Bible is God’s Word, if you think we are free to pick and chose which parts we will follow and which parts we won’t, you won’t really fit in at Chisholm Baptist Church. We have always believed in the authority of the Bible, and always will.

Our third essential belief is that salvation is by grace, through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. We call this the gospel the great news of salvation through Jesus Christ. This is the heart of what Chisholm Baptist is about and has always been about. The gospel **Romans 1:16b is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.**

We emphasize this salvation is by grace, no one can ever earn this salvation. It is never about what we do or say, but what Jesus Christ has done for us, through His life, death and resurrection. And we note that salvation is received through faith. Baptism, church attendance, religious rituals or anything else is not required.

Ephesians 2:8,9 have been foundational for this church for 120 years. **For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.** When, as God enables, we place our trust in Jesus Christ, it means our sins are forgiven, the righteousness of Jesus is counted as our own, we are adopted into God's family, we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and are becoming new creations through Him, and ultimately, we will conquer death and inherit eternal life. That is great news. It is the gospel. And if you don't embrace it, if you think there is another path or other paths that lead to salvation, you won't really fit in at Chisholm Baptist Church. We have always believed salvation is through Jesus Christ alone and always will.

So, these are our three essential beliefs, the triune God, the Bible as the Word of God, and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Or God, the Bible and Jesus. These form the foundation for the stated mission of Chisholm Baptist Church, which is to love God, love others, and make disciples of Jesus Christ. They are also the foundation for our current vision which is to see more and more lives transformed by the gospel across the Iron Range and beyond. Thus, those are three essentials on which we must agree.

Now, if you or someone you know disagrees, does not share these beliefs, you are still welcome here. In fact, we want you to attend worship services and Bible studies. We will listen to your questions and try to provide answers. But to be a member, an official member of Chisholm Baptist Church,

these are truths you need to affirm. We desire unity, and that means we need to have agreement on these essential beliefs.

Non-essential issues, however, there is liberty. This means people at Chisholm Baptist are free to have different beliefs, different opinions, different practices. We can still be united as brothers and sisters, and enjoy unity with our church even when we have differences.

To what difference am I referring? Here are some examples. Some folks at Chisholm Baptist think it would be best if we only sang hymns written before 1950, while others love our newer worship songs. Some think the rapture will occur before the great tribulation, others think it will happen after. Some folks believe the earth is six thousand years old, others think it is millions of years old. Some parents here send their children to a public school, others teach them at home, and others utilize a private Christian school like Victory Christian Academy. Some people here have never touched a drop of alcohol, while others enjoy a can of beer a few times a week. Some read a New Living Translation Bible, while others prefer the King James Version. Some believe the gift of tongues ended with the apostles, others believe it is a gift God gives people today. In this room we have Republicans, Democrats, Independents, and some Libertarians. Some folks here cheer for the Minnesota Vikings and others are fans of the Green Bay Packers.

Now, I am not saying all of these choices are equally good or equally wise. I think some of the beliefs are wrong. Some of the practices are foolish. It is good for us to discuss our differences. There is nothing wrong with trying to persuade others to change their minds and their views. But we do that *within* our unity.

We are a family. Not every member of a biological family sees everything exactly the same way, and not every member of a church family sees everything the same way. But we love each other despite our differences. We choose not to let them disrupt our unity. We want to **Ephesians 4:3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.**

I will add, however, that there are certain issues we should not be discussing, should not be

arguing about, at all. **Titus 3:9** says **But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless.** And **2 Timothy 2:23** says, **Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies (speculations); you know that they breed quarrels.**

A discussion, even a debate about home school versus public school, for example, can be appropriate and even helpful in enabling people to make God honoring choices. But. Some discussion, ones that fall into “the foolish controversies” category, are not worth having, *period*. Yet, these type of discussions occur, and cause conflict and division within churches all the time.

Perhaps the most infamous conflict occurred in Kentucky back in the 1890’s. A deacon at a Baptist church put a peg in the wall at the back of the church for the pastor to hang his hat. One of the other deacons though it was inappropriate that the pastor should have his own peg. And so that congregation split into Peg and Anti-peg-Baptist churches. Folks, there are plenty of topics that simply don’t need to be discussed, *ever*. Because we cherish unity at Chisholm Baptist, we seek to avoid foolish and futile controversies.

Unity in the essentials, liberty in non-essentials and in all things charity. In our day, charity usually refers to giving money to good causes or people in need. Previously, however, charity simply meant “love.” For those who cherish unity, our relationships and controversies are to be guided by love. Disagreeing with someone is not a reason to stop loving that person.

Now, earlier, I noted that Chisholm Baptist Church is characterized by loving fellowship. People care about and for one another. But when people disagree, when we think someone is wrong about an issue, especially an issue we think is important, it is easy to forget to show love to that person. But that is what we need to do if we cherish unity. That is what we do if we are going to **Ephesians 4:3** **Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.**

And it is what God tells us to do. **2 Timothy 2:24, 25** says **And the Lord’s servant must not be**

quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed. Folks those are God’s instructions for how we are to discuss our differences. When we don’t agree on non-essential doctrines, or on what our ministry priorities should be, or how something should be done at the church, this is how we are to treat each other.

Has that always happened at Chisholm Baptist Church over that last 120 years? No. It has not happened the past 33 years that I have been the senior pastor. Unfortunately, there have been times that I have engaged in quarreling and I don’t think I have always been kind to those who have disagreed with me. I have tried not to be resentful, but I’m afraid that poison has seeped into my soul on occasion.

I am not perfect. And you are not perfect. We should be very thankful that Jesus died for all our imperfections, and these sins are forgiven if we are trusting in Jesus Christ. But if we cherish unity, we will want to treat each other with love, without quarrels and resentment, with kindness and gentleness. This is how we will seek to discuss our differences.

And it will also be helpful to heed the instructions the Lord gives us in **James 1:19b, 20** **Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow very slow) to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.**

As I said, I am far from perfect when it comes to loving disagreement, but a month ago I was reminded that I have learned a few things in my 69 years on this planet. I was talking to my friend, Debbie Braaksma, who lives in Louisville, KY. We have been friends for 50 years, since college days at UWEC. She is a believer in Jesus and seeks to serve Him as a Presbyterian pastor. She and I don’t agree on that, female pastors.

We also disagree on a long list of political topics, including immigration policy, which we discussed last month. Over the years our countless debates have sometime been a bit heated, but that day we were both very careful to listen to each other and speak in a respectful tone and kind manner. I think we both would much rather lose a debate

than lose a friendship. Debbie and I love each other, even when we disagree, and we have both figured out that it is best to show that love when we discuss our disagreements. That is something we all should remember.

Chisholm Baptist Church, a church that is Bible loving and Bible centered, a church where people care about and for one another, and a church that cherishes unity. Because we cherish unity we focus on the essentials: God, the Bible, and the Gospel. We respect the fact that people have different opinions on various non-essential topics and practices. And we seek to conduct our discussions, especially over things on which we disagree, with love, respect, and kindness.

Oh, we have not done any of these things perfectly, but it is who Chisholm Baptist Church has always wanted to be in the past, who we want to be today, and who I am confident we want to be in the future. May the Lord indeed help each of us to **Ephesians 4:3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.**