

## A Practical Unity

Galatians 3:27-28

<sup>27</sup>As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup>There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

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Whether you

ride the bus

work in university

spend time at the hospital, or

shop at discount stores,

You encounter people who are different.

Nationality, race and religious faith are the most notable differences, but they are rarely the most difficult.

Instead, it is often by fellow Christians that we are most challenged: conservative verses liberal; traditional verses contemporary worship styles, and faith language verses marketplace language.

Such differences make us uncomfortable and so we avoid others who are different.

At our worst, we discredit them and do not associate with them.

You might mistakenly put this at the bottom of your priorities. On this World Communion Sunday we remember that Jesus was concerned about unity among his followers. John 17 relays Jesus' great prayer for unity.

As someone wrote, "With death breathing down His neck, it was unity that occupied the mind of Christ."<sup>1</sup>

Knowing that unity was important to Jesus, we begin at a surprising place.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Thigpen, "Why Should I Care About Unity?" in "Discipleship Journal", September-October, 1997, p. 34

To the Christians in Galatia who were shaped by national, racial and social divisions, Paul's message had to be stunning:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for....

...all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Although we look different and act differently, Christians are ALREADY united.

We have all put on the same water of baptism, and not only the water, but the loving mercy of God which the water represents and the gift of the Holy Spirit, God's very presence.

This certainly means that our unity is not about uniformity.

Our oneness is spiritual and not physical.

We're all alike in that way: a forgiven and born-from-above people; we are Christians.

Remarkably, even our diversity serves the purpose of unity in Christ. As one person perceptibly observed,

diversity enables us to uncover our mistakes and discover more clearly the truth.<sup>2</sup>

Knowing that diversity is not necessarily opposed to unity, we can move from frustration to friendship.

I made a discovery in this area over the past year.

For a long time, I've been disappointed in my of my clergy colleagues – Presbyterian and others.

Some have taken their faith so seriously they believe that only they have the truth.

Others take their faith too lightly and think that it demands less of them.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Calhoun, quoted in John H. Leith's Basic Christian Doctrine, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, 1993, p. 241

Some, whether conservative or liberal, see their faith primarily as political; they are out to change the world and somehow have lost touch with the love your neighbor part of the faith.

Tired of seeing more sinners than saints, I limited my time among my colleagues.

This past year, however, I joined a group of pastors in a study that our Presbytery started.

I knew the content of the study would be helpful to me, and I decided I could endure the group.

During my year with them however, something happened.

I began to realize that while none of them were a perfect reflection of Jesus, some part of their life WAS a reflection of Jesus.

And over the year, that “Christ in them” blessed me in some way.

Before, I would not have invited them for coffee; now, I am pleased to call them my friends.

If we avoid one another because of our differences, we will never see the ways that we are related, that spirit connection, that family trait that lets you know without a doubt, we come from the same savior stock.

Time together helps us to see the ways that we are already connected.

But it requires more than our time.

We must have a CHANGE OF ATTITUDE; rather than FENCE TENDING we need to be BRIDGE BUILDING – finding that one point of connection where the Christi living in them can connect with the Christ living within us.

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Here’s where we begin:

Because unity was Jesus’ concern, it must be our concern.

Following Jesus we resolve to live into that unity by

- Guarding against divisions that destroy what Jesus died to give us.
- Looking not at the outward marks of people, but for Christ dwelling within.
- Resolving to treat others with the respect due our beloved kin.
- Leaving behind our fences so that we can build bridges of mutual friendship.

Living into our unity we honor our God who is both diverse (Father, Son, and Spirit)..and yet One.

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