

What Christian Unity Is and Isn't

Unity among two or more people gets its virtue entirely from something else. Unity itself is neutral until it is given goodness or badness by something else.

So if Herod and Pilate are unified by their common scorn for Jesus (Luke 23:12), this is not a good unity. But if Paul and Silas sing together in prison for Christ's sake (Acts 16:25), this is a good unity.

Therefore, it is never enough to call Christians to have unity. That may be good or bad. The unified vote fifty years ago in my home church in South Carolina to forbid blacks from attending services was not a good unity. The unified vote of a mainline Protestant denomination to bless forbidden sexual acts is not a good unity.

What Makes Unity Christian?

Christian unity in the New Testament gets its goodness from a combination of its *source*, its *views*, its *affections*, and its *aims*.

Source

Paul tells us to "be eager to keep the *unity of the Spirit* in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). I take that to mean that the Holy Spirit is the great giver of unity. "For by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body, whether we are Jews or Gentiles, whether we are slaves or free, and we have all been made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13).

Views

Paul says that pastors and teachers are to equip the saints "until we all come into the *unity of the faith and of the*

knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph. 4:13). In other words, the unity we pursue is unity in the truth. Of course, Christian unity is more than shared truth, but not less. Paul piles up the words for common-mindedness in Phil. 2:2, "then fulfill my joy and be *like-minded*, having the same love, being in *full accord* and of *one mind*" (see also Philippians 4:2). Everything is to be "in accordance with Christ." "Now may the God . . . grant you to live in harmony with one another *in accordance with Christ Jesus*" (Rom. 15:5).

Affections

To be sure, unifying love in the body of Christ includes a rugged commitment to do good for the family of God whether you feel like it or not (Gal. 6:10). But, as difficult as it is for diverse people, the experience of Christian unity is more than that. It includes affectionate love, not just sacrifice for those you don't like. It is a feeling of endearment. We are to have affection for those who are our family in Christ. "Love one another with *brotherly affection*" (Rom. 12:10, ESV). "Since your souls have been purified by obedience to the truth through the Spirit unto a *genuine brotherly love*, love one another *deeply with a pure heart*" (1 Pet. 1:22). "Finally, be all of one mind, *be loving toward one another, be gracious, and be kind*" (1 Pet. 3:8).

Aims

Spirit-rooted, Christ-manifesting, truth-cherishing, humbly-loving unity is designed by God to have at least two aims: a witness to the world, and an acclamation of the glory of God. The apostle John makes the first of these most clear. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34–35).

Jesus's famous statements in John 17 are rooted in the profound spiritual unity between the Father and the Son, and

with those whom God has chosen out of the world (John 17:6). “I ask that they may all be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You. May they also be one in Us, *that the world may believe that You have sent Me*” (John 17:21). Note the witness to the world is that the disciples are *in the Father and the Son* so that the world might believe. This is vastly more—deeply more—than being related through a common organization.

The oneness that shines with self-authenticating glory for the world to see is union with the Father and the Son so that the glory of the Father and the Son is part of our lives. “*I have given them the glory which You gave Me*, that they may be one even as We are one” (John 17:22). That glory is owing to this: “*I in them and You [Father] in Me*” (John 17:23). From this union with God, and the glory it gives, shines something the world may see, if God gives them eyes to see. God’s aim for this vertically-rooted, horizontal, glory-displaying unity is that He might “also gather together in unity the children of God who were scattered abroad” (John 11:52).

The ultimate aim of such Christian unity is the glory of God. Hence Paul prays, “May the God of perseverance and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another in accordance with Christ Jesus, *so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Therefore welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed us, *for the glory of God*” (Rom. 15:5–7).

What Implications Follow for Us?

1. Seek the fullness of the unity-creating Holy Spirit. “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is reckless living. But be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). Seek to be led by the Spirit and to bear the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:18, 22–23) for these are the cogs in the wheels of love. If you are a stranger to the Holy Spirit, you will care little for the unity he builds.

2. Strive to know and spread true views of Christ and his ways. Seek to attain to “the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Eph. 4:13). “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18). Share, by every means you can, what you see of Christ. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another” (Col. 3:16).

3. Love Christians across boundaries. Cultivate affection across differences for those who are truly your brothers and sisters in Christ. Hate serious blunders, not sincere brothers. Humans have never been good at this. And the philosophical and emotional climate today makes it even harder—since truth claims are only seen as a cloak for power grabbing. But consider what Spurgeon says and seek to become like him. Notice the intensity of hate and love.

Where the Spirit of God is there must be love, and if I have once known and recognized any man to be my brother in Christ Jesus, the love of Christ constraineth me no more to think of him as a stranger or foreigner, but a fellow citizen with the saints. Now I hate High Churchism as my soul hates Satan; but I love George Herbert, although George Herbert is a desperately High Churchman. I hate his High Churchism, but I love George Herbert from my very soul, and I have a warm corner in my heart for every man who is like him. Let me find a man who loves my Lord Jesus Christ as George Herbert did and I do not ask myself whether I shall love him or not; there is no room for question, for I cannot help myself; unless I can leave off loving Jesus Christ, I cannot cease loving those who love him. (*The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. XII, 6)

4. Serve Christians across boundaries. For the sake of a witness to the world, seek out ways to show love for brothers and sisters across boundaries—both the kind of boundaries that should be removed, and the kind of boundaries which commitment to the truth (and unity in the truth) forbids you to remove.

Do this for the glory of God. Let Francis Schaeffer be your guide.

It is in the midst of a difference that we have our *golden opportunity*. When everything is going well and we are all standing around in a nice little circle, there is not much to be seen by the world. But when we come to the place where there is a real difference, and we exhibit *uncompromised principles but at the same time observable love*, then there is something that the world can see, something they can use to judge that these really are Christians, and that Jesus has indeed been sent by the Father. (*Complete Works*, vol. 4, 201, emphasis added)

Ambiguity and Hope

When all is said and done, ambiguities remain. What kinds of boundaries should define local churches, schools, denominations, conferences, para-church ministries, citywide prayer gathering, evangelistic efforts?

Nevertheless we are not without anchors. We are not without rudder and sails. We have the stars above and our trusty sextant. In reliance on the word and the Spirit, in humility we will arrive home—together.

John Piper (@JohnPiper) is founder and teacher of and chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary. For 33 years, he served as pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota. He is author of more than 50 books.

For the original article, visit [.](#)