**Cultivating Unity in Divisive Times**

All by itself, life presents countless opportunities for disunity among God’s people. Add a global pandemic, politics and national issues, and international “tribalism,” and you’ve got a recipe for disunity of disastrous proportions. As biblically driven leaders, we are responsible to lead God’s people to “preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” This workshop will consider the epidemic of disunity, and practical ways that leaders can build gospel-driven unity in a church or ministry organization.

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Introduction

One of the word pictures used in the New Testament about the church is that the church is “the body of Christ.” Numerous teaching points arise from that analogy, but among the most important is an emphasis on the unity of believers in the body of Christ, built on a solid foundation of biblical truth. In our session today, I want to make three statements about unity in the body of Christ, and then offer suggestions about how we cultivate a spirit of unity among those we serve.

1. We Must Be EAGER to Maintain Unity (Ephesians 4:1-6)
2. Ephesians is a letter about God’s “mystery” – the Church – the body of Christ. Paul teaches us about what the Church is, and about how followers of Christ should live.
3. A core issue: All true Christians are placed into the body of Christ when they trust Christ as their Savior; this is true regardless of denomination, ethnicity, family background, past failures, etc.
4. We are not called to *create* unity that does not exist, but to *eagerly maintain* – to guard, to protect, to value – the unity that is already present because we are united with Christ as one.
5. Paul notes in 4:16 that “each part” must be working properly for the body to be built up. Each part, though different, is valuable and essential.
6. We Must See Unity as VALUABLE and VULNERABLE (I Corinthians 12:12-26; John 17:20-23)
7. The letter to the Corinthians is written to a divided church; that is, they are not “maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”
8. Paul uses the human body to teach both unity and diversity. A healthy physical body has great diversity, including differing viewpoints. Though sometimes we prefer the easier path of “uniformity,” the Bible calls us to pursue Biblical Diversity.
9. Biblical Diversity means that, built upon a solid foundation of biblical truth, followers of Jesus embrace differing functions, differing passions, differing specialties, and even different perspectives on non-essential issues (I did not say, “non-important”). God’s people view life through countless lenses, including: Political, Economic, Prophetic, Medical, Biblical, Conspiracy, Cultural…
10. Check in with Jesus in John 17. Why do you think He prays for unity among His followers and not about lots of other important things?
11. We Must PURSUE Unity Out of Love for Christ and Love of Others (Romans 14:1-12)
12. NOTE the key phrase: “Let not the one who \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ despise the one who \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.” This addresses our attitudes toward other people who see things differently than we do.
13. BEWARE of the idea that “All smart Jesus-loving people think like I do,” or “If that person would only read THIS article or social media post or book, then that person would think like I do,” or “It is my job to convince others to think like me.” How about a little humility here, folks? Could it be that you’re not nearly as smart or biblically informed as you think you are?

Practical Suggestions

1. TEACH principles of unity and Biblical diversity even when there is no pandemic or other pressing issue. Every church or mission agency or group of Christians needs to have the pursuit of unity as part of their “organizational DNA.”
2. APPLY these principles every change you get. Potentially divisive topics include political parties (lean to the right or lean to the left?), pandemic protocols (do you love masks or hate them?), racial and ethnic controversies (who do YOU associate with and who gets the most attention from your ministry?), use of alcohol (some cultures say yes, others say no), use of money (how much is too much?), and SO many more topics that are often driven by culture and denominational background.
3. LEAD your church or organization by example. Leaders should lead in this.
4. GUARD against threats to unity! Invite your congregation or group to follow you in…
   1. Speaking well of those we differ with, and NOT talking badly about those on the “other side.” Have opinions, yes, but especially as a leader, you must guard what you express publicly. Make sure your first allegiance is to God’s Kingdom, not to any other.
   2. Refraining from posting argumentative or divisive material on social media! To be a spokesperson for Jesus first, you must guard your “voice” – that is, if you use your online presence to address needless or secondary topics, you will lose your ability to lead those who disagree with you.
   3. Listening to other opinions without an argumentative spirit. You might learn something.
   4. Keeping “first things” first, and “secondary issues” as truly secondary. For further study, you might read, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On,* by Gavin Ortlund.

To Discuss or Think About:

* In my cultural context, what are the “hot topics” that people are talking about that could easily bring division to the body of Christ where I serve?
* In what practical ways can I cultivate unity among those I serve with?