

# Voices: Challenges to Christian unity

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Splitting a local congregation ought to be more difficult than splitting an atom, and dividing the universal church ought to be more difficult than dividing the sun. But division seems to be the natural order of things for Christian (and other) groups. Why?

In my next article, I will discuss a series of threats to Christian unity—historical and cultural phenomena particular to the United States. But churches in every time and every culture struggle with unity. So, in this article, I want to explore some of the challenges we all face as we try to live out Christ's vision for his body.

## Insights from Scripture

Scripture insists much of the disunity in our midst is the result of our own failure to live in accordance with the message of Jesus and the guidance of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 12:20-21; Galatians 5:13-26; Philippians 2:1-11; James 3:13-17).

It is astonishing how both Paul and James cluster so many descriptors around one another, illustrating a particular orientation rooted in envy, arrogance and ambition, and resulting in a wide variety of socially unhealthy behaviors. This orientation is not only “demonic,” but it also is inconsistent with citizenship in God's kingdom.

As if to drive home the seriousness of these matters, both Paul and James closely associate this sinful orientation with other, more obvious sins. Moreover, they both contrast it with a different kind of life—one rooted in

humility and selflessness and resulting in gentleness, social order and human flourishing.

Mathew's Gospel gives us another way to think about the problem Paul and James describe. Jesus was nothing if not realistic about how the church would function (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43). Nevertheless, he insisted the gospel is about losing ourselves in devotion to our master (Matthew 16:21-27; 24:45-51; 25:14-30) and in care for one another (Matthew 7:12; 22:34-40; 25:31-46).

Too many Christian leaders, however, have seen both the gospel and the church as means to gratify their most debased cravings. As Russell Moore points out in *Losing Our Religion*, such leaders not only corrupt everything they touch, but they also drive godly leaders out of our institutions. Their narcissism, shamelessness and psychopathy choke out anything honest, wholesome or beautiful.

## Insights from current events

Not all division has its origins in sin. Sometimes, the dynamics of a group can be so fraught with difficulty and complexity they make unity almost impossible.

We could illustrate this point with numerous examples from Baptist history, but sometimes it is easier for us to see challenges like the ones I am describing when we look at someone else's problems.

Recently, *Christianity Today* [reported](#) on the struggles faced by the Evangelical Presbyterian Church as it tries to live out its historic emphasis on unity in a new situation. Observers of the denomination pointed to the influx of churches from both sides of the evangelical/mainline-Protestant divide as contributing to the challenges, but they also made two more interesting observations.

First, these observers noted individuals and congregations are operating on the basis of different narratives. That is, they tell different stories about who they are, about why the denomination exists and about why the denomination is needed. These stories are important because they both reflect and shape values, but they also present members of the denomination with rival slates of heroes, villains, opportunities and threats.

What makes foundational narratives so powerful—and so problematic—is we tend to gravitate toward stories that sound like our own. Thus, many of our assumptions about God, ourselves and the world never are challenged or scrutinized.

We walk into dialogue with other Christians carrying a false sense of certainty, and we leave that dialogue bewildered as to why they do not share our thoughts, feelings, perceptions and values.

Second, individuals and congregations are operating out of different theological frameworks. Some emphasize the “evangelical” part of the denomination’s identity, while others emphasize the “Presbyterian” aspect of that identity.

Of course, these frameworks are more rooted in the stories people tell themselves than they realize, but they also have a life of their own, shaping the way people think about controversial topics and even their foundational narratives.

## **Not as simple as it looks**

One might wonder, “Can’t we just tell people to immerse themselves in the gospel story, allowing it to shape both their character and their identity?” If only it were that simple.

Without doubt, we need to make the story of God’s creative and redemptive

activity in the world our foundational narrative, and it ought to be the framework through which we build the intellectual and emotional components of our identity. But that is always a work in progress. So is the process of dying to ourselves and living for Christ.

Moreover, even if everyone in the church was committed to the orientation that Paul and James demand, and even if we were all good at immersing ourselves in the grand story of Scripture, we still would be impacted by the joys and pains of our own story.

We cannot get away from the particularity and the limitations of being human, and so the call to unity is also a call to engage creatively and faithfully the many and varied stories we bring to the church.

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