

Voices: Defining unity scripturally

August 14, 2024

Several years ago, I did some supply preaching for a church without a pastor. I preached a couple of sermons on unity, reasoning a church that had been in decline for as long as this one might benefit from a renewal of its call to mutual affection, concern and support.

I also knew the congregation had experienced a significant amount of conflict over the previous year, and I hoped a deep and compassionate exploration of Scripture's vision for the church might allow the members of this congregation to process some of the pain they bore.

After the second sermon, a member of the search committee called me—without the knowledge or permission of the rest of its members. He asked me not to preach on unity anymore, asserting, "We're already united."

I was flabbergasted by the audacity of such a request. As my wife so artfully put the matter: "Of course, they're united. They ran off everyone who disagrees with them!"

It is an-all-too familiar story—both in our congregations and our denominations. Some people use unity to force conformity upon their peers in the organization, while others use it to avoid accountability for their heterodoxy and moral decadence. Both uses of the term fall short of the vision Christ and his apostles had for the church.

Unity and agreement

In our individualistic, democratized society, the first question many people are going to ask about unity is, “How much do we have to agree to be united?”

It is a fair question, for Scripture presumes we will agree with one another about the essentials of the faith (1 Corinthians 15:1-11). But what about other matters?

Paul seems to anticipate uniformity will not be possible always, either in doctrine or in practice (Romans 14:1-15:13). And yet, at least one of the primary messages of Romans is the various house churches in the imperial city can, and should, work with one another and with Paul to advance the gospel.

This appeal is built upon the gospel itself (Romans 1:16-8:39; 9:30-10:17)—a message that emphasizes the need all humans have for grace and the hope all humans can receive in Christ.

Observing Paul’s clear teaching that unity in Christ should transcend the differences of ethnicity, gender, class and culture that so often divide people from one another (see Galatians 3:26-29; Colossians 3:11), some have argued unity also should transcend points of significant disagreement among Christians about theology, ethics and politics.

Indeed, these points of disagreement sometimes are presented as strengths to be cultivated.

Two challenges

While leadership theorists long have championed the importance of healthy disagreement, arguing it makes organizations more effective, applying this

perspective to unity in the church faces at least two challenges.

First, Paul explicitly calls upon his converts to agree with one another, not just in how they think, but also in what they say (1 Corinthians 1:10; see Philippians 4:2-3). Indeed, Paul presents the quarrels that result from disagreements in the church as a sign of spiritual immaturity (1 Corinthians 3:3) or even of corrupt character (1 Timothy 6:2b-5).

Second, when foundational convictions differ, Christians end up working at cross-purposes with one another.

Imagine if one congregation is lobbying for a sexually sadistic murderer to be put to death while another church right down the street is lobbying for capital punishment to be abolished.

Can these two churches be said to be in Christian unity? I think not.

Their differing activities within the public sphere evidence deeper disagreements about the nature of God, the meaning of justice, and possibly even the implications of the gospel.

More than agreement

Nevertheless, it hardly can be denied that a biblical vision of unity extends far beyond what historian James Davison Hunter calls “consensus.” It looks a whole lot more like what he describes as “solidarity.”

Consider, for example, Paul’s description of unity in Philippians 1:27-2:4. For the venerable apostle, Christian unity is rooted in our shared experience of Christ and the Spirit.

That shared experience not only creates a common ecosystem in which Christian minds reflect the mind of Christ (see Philippians 2:5-11), but it also produces shared, positive emotions that bind believers to one another.

The connection is so close that Paul compounds two words into one—“one-souled”—as if he is straining both his mind and the linguistic resources available to him to communicate his vision for the church. And that unity should produce a common struggle on behalf of the gospel.

Or consider Ephesians 4:1-6. Here, Paul presents unity as a product of the Spirit’s presence and activity, and yet, he also calls believers to play their part in preserving that unity.

What does the Spirit give to the church? He gives it a common object of worship, a common locus of authority, a common deposit of trustworthy revelation, a common ritual, a common social identity that also functions as our mechanism for acting on Christ’s behalf, and a common hope that carries us through the suffering of this life.

And what is our part in all this? Paul says it is to cultivate a character, both individually and corporately, defined by humility, patience, gentleness and love.

Scripture’s vision of unity

These texts, among many others, do not deny the importance of agreeing with one another about important issues of faith and practice. Indeed, they seem to assume that agreement. But they push us to a far deeper understanding of what unity looks like.

They present us with the challenge of viewing one another through the lens of the oneness for which Christ prayed (John 17:11, 20-23), and they call us to construct our self-understanding in a way that includes those who are not like us in many ways but who share our commitment to and experience of the Triune God.

It is this deeper dimension of unity that will help us navigate the challenges

of life together in Christ. After all, the Bible is nothing if not realistic about the human condition.

We are finite, both in terms of our experience and in terms of our abilities. Moreover, we are fallen. We are going to sin sometimes, and that means we also will disagree with one another sometimes.

We need a vision of unity that can hold us together even when the world, the devil and our own flesh are trying to tear us apart, and that is what Scripture gives us.

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