

This Is What Unity Looks Like!

Phil Engelman

When I was a young pastor, I was suspicious of every church except those of my own denomination. I looked with pride at what we were doing and considered it superior to the “competing” churches across town. I thought I was committed to building Christ’s kingdom, but in many ways, I was building my own. My success was measured by growth in numbers, building programs, and staff additions. What’s more I came from a background that feared any unity effort as part of a last days one-world church which would compromise every precious truth of God’s Word. Sounds foolish, doesn’t it? Thank God he humbled me over time and opened my eyes to the true heart of Jesus and his burdened intercession for us in John 17 to “be one.”

Last night I spoke at a community-wide gathering of believers from churches all over our county. These were all brothers and sisters coming from a wide variety of traditions, who all love Jesus, the gospel, and believe the Word of God. Together we lifted our voices in praise and worship led by a spirited group of blacks, whites and browns. I felt humbled and honored to be part of this event inspired in many ways by the John 17:23 pastors groups we’ve established here in the past few years.

What does unity look like? It’s a unity based on God’s Son, who He is, what He has done for us, and the power of the gospel to save. It’s based on the heart of Jesus who yearned for his people to be one even as He and the Father are one. What would it look like for this heartache, this prayer of Jesus, to be fulfilled?

It would manifest in a love for one another, a genuine concern for one other, the ability to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. It would manifest in there being no sense of competition between us, no sense of being threatened by the success of other ministries, but rather the instinct to celebrate anything that advances the kingdom of Christ.

It would manifest in our never letting our differences divide us. Theological differences in the lesser things, differences in our politics, differences in race or ethnicity.

We remember the scene in Revelation. 5:9-10: *The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb and cried out, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”* We belong to that multitude of redeemed people!

How do we grow in unity? We recognize that while we have liberty in minor things, we have an equal commitment to unity in major things. There’s a well-known and often used maxim: “In Essentials Unity, In Non-Essentials Liberty, In All Things Charity.” Some say it like this: *“In major things we must have unity, in minor things we must have liberty, but in all things we must have charity (love.)”*

This saying, often ascribed to great theologians like Augustine, may have actually come from an otherwise unknown German Lutheran theologian of the early seventeenth century, Rupertus Meldenus. The phrase occurs in a tract on Christian unity written around 1627, during the Thirty Years War (1618–1648.)

It was a bloody time in European history in which religious tensions played a big role. The saying was picked up by many later writers like Richard Baxter, and has since been adopted as a motto by some denominations. Would it not serve well as a motto for us all?

Since we know that oneness is the heart prayer of Jesus, might it play a role in the timing of Christ's return? In the words of Dick Germaine, founder of Barnabas Ministries, Inc., "If ever the Father was to answer a prayer it would certainly be the one offered by His Son, Jesus." Many believe the second coming of Christ awaits the addition of the last soul who will make up the bride of Christ. But might there be another ingredient, the mature oneness of His people? After all, what is the outcome of such oneness according to the prayer of Jesus? "So the world will know that the Father sent the Son!"

One day I was reading through Ephesians 4:11-16 and something caught my eye:

Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church... Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. Then we will no longer be immature like children. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love. (New Living Translation)

Believing this vision won't be fulfilled until we're all perfected in the presence of Christ, it suddenly occurred to me that this might actually be possible now. This is why I am so committed to our John 17:23 pastor support groups. We have a chance connect with one another across denominational lines, loving one another, praying with and for one another and for our shared communities, so the world can see "that the Father sent the Son." May it be so for each of us personally and for each of our ministries.

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