

**Core Seminar**

**Living as a Church**

**Class 1: Unity**

*A Display of God’s Glory in the Local Church*

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I. Introduction

Good morning. Welcome to the first of 13 classes we’ll have on our life together as a Church. I’m Matt, a Pastoral Assistant here at the church. This morning, my hope is to cast a vision for what I would like us to accomplish together. But before I begin talking, I want to ask you a question to get us started. **Why is unity important to the local church?** [What comes to your mind... churches bickering over color of carpet?]

Great! Now, let’s start off this class on unity very simply. In short, this class exists because of three simple facts that we find in Scripture:

1. God has called Christians to be with him forever, but for a time, he’s left us in this world, gathered into local churches
2. He has chosen to use our life together in churches as a primary method of displaying his glory
3. We are sinners

The first two facts work well together—but the third fact complicates matters considerably. Some day, the whole world will bow before God and acknowledge he is Lord. But for now, God in his wisdom has left the task of displaying the glory of his *perfect* character through the very *imperfect* people who compose his Church. The question of how that can happen is the focus of this class. And in particular, our goal is to understand the opportunities and responsibilities that we have as *church members*. How is it that we as sinners can gather together as a local church where unity abounds? And not a forced unity that denies differences, overlooks difficulty, or compromises the message of the gospel, but a real unity acts as a compelling testimony to the power of the gospel? How is it that as sinners, we can respond to sin in our midst without descending to gossip and slander? How can we trust our leaders but still recognize that they are sinners too? How can we love people who make us feel uncomfortable because they’re so different from us? How can we critique an imperfect church without grumbling?

For those of you who have been around churches for any amount of time, you’ve probably noticed that these goals are tough to achieve. Too often, churches become places of division, grumbling, and bitterness. Too often, churches fail to display to the watching world the power of the gospel that should be at work within them. Our goal for this class is to explore a practical blueprint of what makes a church healthy and united: sound doctrine expressing itself in unifying love that glorifies God. My prayer is that each of us will leave this class with a better understanding of what the Bible says about being a united church, and with some very clear ideas of what we can each do to build unity in our midst.

For today’s class, I’m going to begin by looking at the idea of unity, mainly by using the description we find in Ephesians 3 and 4 of what it means to be a church. Next, we’ll look at some counterfeit versions of unity, contrast them with real unity, and talk about the reason unity in a church is so important.

**II. Ephesians 3-4: God’s Goal for the Church**

Let’s start out by answering a foundational question: what is God’s plan for the local church? The apostle Paul lays it out in Ephesians chapters two and three. If you have a Bible, go ahead and turn there. It begins with the gospel, in 2:1-10. We were “dead in the trespasses and sins” (2:1). But God “made us alive together with Christ” (2:5). “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (2:8-9).

But that gospel doesn’t end with our salvation; it leads to some very disruptive implications. Implication number one: unity. As Paul writes of Jews and Gentiles at the end of chapter two, God abolished the dividing wall of hostility “that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.” (2:15b-18).

Note that the gospel *alone* creates this unity: it is the *cross* by which Christ has put to death their hostility. After all, what else could ever bring together two peoples with such different history, ethnicity, religion, and culture?

Now, what’s the purpose for this unity between Jews and Gentiles? Skip down to chapter three, verse 10:

His intent was “that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.”

Take a group of Jews and Gentiles who share nothing in common except for a centuries-old loathing for one another. A shadow of that in our context might be liberal Democrats and libertarian Republicans. Bring them together into the local church where they rub shoulders on a regular basis, and things explode, right? No! Because of the one thing they do have in common—the bond of Christ—they live together in astonishing love and unity. Unity that is so unexpected, so contrary to how our world operates, that even the “rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms” sit up and take notice.

Amazing, isn’t it?

This unity is notable along two dimensions. It’s notable for its breadth. That is, it stretches to include peoples as divergent as Jew and Gentile. Which glorifies God by reaching people who, apart from supernatural power, would never unite together. Remember Ephesians 2:18, “For through him we *both* have access in one Spirit to the Father.”

Second, this unity is notable for its depth. That is, it doesn’t merely bring people together to tolerate each other, but to be so tightly committed that Paul can call them a “new humanity” (2:15) and a new “family” (2:19). Paul reaches for the natural world’s deepest bonds—the bonds of ethnicity and family—to describe this new community in the local church.

Unity with supernatural breadth and depth makes visible the glory of an invisible God. This is the ultimate purpose statement for unity in the Ephesian church. This is the ultimate purpose statement for unity in our church. And these two concepts will be really important for this core seminar. In fact, we’ll have an entire class on depth of unity as we think about the commitment of church membership. And an entire class on breadth of unity as we think about diversity as a defining mark of the local church.

This is our call as a church. But that calling has some competition, which I want to lay out for you now.

**III. Counterfeit Unity**

**Organizational Unity**

One problem we have whenever we begin talking about Christian unity is that some people define Christian unity as the idea that all people who call themselves Christians should organize together—or at least cooperate together--as a single recognizable body. They say that the existence of different denominations proves to the world that we’re not united.

One challenge of this view is that it doesn’t leave any room for loving disagreement. We can disagree with our Presbyterian brothers and sisters over baptism, for example—and still do all sorts of good things together for the gospel. In that sense, denominations actually showcase our unity in the gospel more strongly than if we merely pretended that our disagreements didn’t matter. The conference our pastor helps run called “Together for the Gospel” is a good example of this.

And another difficulty with this view is what the end goal of such “unity” would be. There are many who call themselves “Christians,” but who would disagree with our church on such fundamentals as who God is, what people must do to be saved, even whether we need to be saved from sin at all. That means that organizational unity for the sake of organizational unity can actually utterly confuse the world about the nature of Christianity and of the gospel. It’s certainly a good thing to cooperate with others for the sake of a common goal—working with Roman Catholics to protect the rights of the unborn, for example. But while that’s a type of unity, it’s not the supernatural gospel unity that Paul speaks about in Ephesians.

**Gospel-Plus Unity**

The second counterfeit of true Christian unity is more subtle, and I think we’re at more risk for it. So let’s start with an example. Let’s say that a DC public school teacher joins our church. Who is he naturally going to build friendships with? Who’s naturally going to understand him best? Other teachers, of course. So I introduce him to other teachers, and maybe eventually we get a small group together for teachers. And sure enough, he quickly integrates into that community and thrives. Unity created. Mission accomplished, right? Not quite.

What occurred is possibly more a demographic phenomenon than a gospel phenomenon. Teachers gravitate to teachers regardless of whether or not they’re Christians. And there’s nothing wrong with wanting to be with people of similar life experience. It’s entirely natural and can be spiritually beneficial. But if this is the sum total of what we call “church community,” I’m afraid we’ve built something that would exist even if God didn’t.

In contrast to what we see in Ephesians, this unity is something I’m going to call “gospel-plus” unity. In a gospel-plus community, nearly every relationship is founded on the gospel *plus* something else. So we’ll take Sam and Joe; they are both Christians, but the real reason they’re friends is because they’re both singles in their 40s, or share a passion to fight illiteracy, or they’re both nurses. In gospel-plus unity, we use similarity to build community.

Contrast this with “gospel-revealing” community. In gospel-revealing community, many relationships would never exist except for the power of the gospel—either because of the depth of care for each other or because two people in relationship have little in common but Christ. Sure, affinity-based relationships can also thrive in this church—but they’re not the focus. They happen naturally. Instead, we *focus* on helping people out of their comfort zones to build relationships that wouldn’t be possible apart from the supernatural. And so this community reveals the power of the gospel.

Think about a balloon that’s been rubbed against your shirt to charge it with static electricity. Then hold it over someone’s head who has thin, wispy hair. What happens? Their hair reaches for the balloon. You can’t see the static electricity. But its effect—the unnatural reaction of the hair—is unmistakable. The same goes for gospel-revealing unity. You can’t see the gospel; it’s simply truth. But when we encourage unity that is obviously supernatural, it makes the gospel visible. I wonder if you can think of relationships you have in this church that you only have because Christ has brought you together. I can think of many in my own life and in others that I’ve observed. You wouldn’t rub shoulders with that person in the world, but because you’re both in Christ, you have a family-like care, concern and affection for each other. That love is making the electricity of the gospel visible to the world!

Does this mean that we should flee any relationships where we share something else in addition to Christ? Should I not be friends with other married men in the church who like rock and roll and New York Mets baseball? No: God uses our natural similarities. And every church has a certain culture, a certain feel, a certain primary language, even a certain cultural majority. It would be dishonest to suggest otherwise, to say that a congregation really shares nothing in common but Christ. Like is attracted to like, and that’s natural. But an important question is whether we will let differences become a barrier to fellowship—*or* an invitation to engage in fellowship to glorify the gospel. Will we insist on ministry by similarity, which feels natural? Or, while recognizing our tendency toward similarity, will we set our aspiration on community where dissimilar people enjoy remarkable fellowship only because of the supernatural bond of the gospel?

Unity that matters—that accomplishes God’s purposes for it—is demonstrably supernatural. It’s not unity built around the gospel plus some other bond of similarity. It’s unity that reveals the gospel.

**IV. What is Unity?**

So having looked at these two counterfeits, what is real Christian unity? Real Christian unity that Paul talks about in his letter to the Ephesians could be defined as an **action**, a **purpose**, a **source**, and a **context**.

The *action* is love. In particular, love for our brothers and sisters in Christ that crosses societal boundaries. Think of Jesus’ words—“If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?”

Next, the *purpose* is the glory of God in the vindication of his gospel. Unity that exists for any other purpose may well be valuable, but it’s not the Christian unity that we are exploring in this class.

Third, the *source*: the love of Christ. “We love because he first loved us.” Love that is supernatural—that can only be explained by the power of God at work in us. If unity is driven by love that the world is familiar with and can explain away, how will that display the wisdom of God to the “rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms?” No—unity that glorifies God and vindicates the wisdom of the gospel is unity that is powered by our understanding how forgiven we are in Christ. Do you remember Jesus’ words in Luke 7? “He who has been forgiven little loves little.” And he who has been forgiven much loves much. If at any point in time this class becomes just a list of to-dos—things that you know you should do and probably can do if you just grit your teeth and try hard—then we’re headed in the wrong direction. The unity that we’re interested in—the unity that is supernatural—has at its source a deep understanding of how forgiven we are. Not only must Christian unity have as its goal the gospel, but at its core, it must be powered by that same gospel message. Anything less is merely the work of human beings.

And finally, a *context*: love that, while not limited to the local church, works itself out most practically in that context. Those four pieces are the definition that you see on the page: *God-glorifying, gospel-revealing love for all brothers and sisters in Christ, fueled by our forgiveness in Christ that expresses itself most clearly in the assembly of the local church.*

That is Christian unity—God’s plan to reveal the wisdom of the gospel to all peoples.

**QUESTIONS?**

**V. What’s at Stake?**

I’ve been saying that we need to aim for the right kind of unity in our church. That if we don’t, we actually compromise God’s purposes for the church. But what are the stakes, exactly? If our unity is based on natural bonds rather than the supernatural gospel, what are we giving up? Let’s start with the mission of the church as stated at the end of the book of Matthew.

In Matthew 28, Jesus commissions his church as he tells his disciples:

*“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (28:18b-20)*

At the risk of oversimplification, there are two main thrusts of this Great Commission. We are to share the gospel with all nations (including our own)—baptizing those who believe. In other words, *evangelism*. And we are to build up followers of Jesus: teaching each new generation of converts “everything I have commanded you.” In other words, *discipleship*.

When we build local church unity that isn’t evidently supernatural, we compromise both elements of our Commission. We compromise our evangelism and we compromise our discipleship.

*1. We Compromise Evangelism*.

Jesus’ words in John 13 describe our power in evangelism. “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” And not just any love will do: the prior verse sets the standard for this love: “*As I have loved you*, so you must love one another.” Love with the depthof the cross; love with breadthto reach from heaven to earth. The love that will mark believers in the world’s eyes as followers of Jesus is the same kind of costly, God-exalting, supernatural love that Jesus shows us.

Now, does love exist in a community that’s formed around something other than the gospel? Of course it does. Think of the kind of community you would find at Alcoholics Anonymous or the Rotary club, or the Facebook page for your favorite band. There’s friendship there—even affection—that is wonderful and real. But is this the inexplicable-without-God love that Jesus describes in John 13? No: it’s love the world recognizes. Instead, the love of John 13 and Ephesians 3 is *supernatural*. When community in the local church defies natural explanation, it confirms the supernatural power of the gospel.[[1]](#footnote-1)

So what is the cost of community in the local church that is not evidently supernatural? Back to John 13:35: we suppress what God intends as gospel confirmation. Evangelism without supernatural community is like pushing water uphill. It’s like doing “show and tell” without the “show” part. Because we serve a gracious God, he is still pleased to save souls as we tell the gospel. But without supernatural community, evangelism lacks the primary witness that God has given to show off the power of the gospel to the world.

*2. We Compromise Discipleship*

Take a look at Ephesians 4:14. Paul says the goal of our life together in the local church is “so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.”

That’s what we want to see at CHBC, right? A body of believers standing firm in our obedience to Christ: the second piece of the Great Commission. Even as we’re buffeted by false doctrines and by human scheming, we hold firm to the trustworthy message of the gospel. What you see here is maturity, holiness. We grow up into Christ.

Now, where does this come from? Paul gives a beautiful chain in the preceding verses that shows how this maturity comes from Christ. Verse 7, Christ gives gifts to the church. Verse 11, those gifts are leaders like prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers who teach his people his Word. Their job, verse 12, is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry,” until verse 13, “we all attain to the **unity** of the faith.” Do you see that? So, who is it that God calls to the job of ministry? Is it mainly the elders? Is it the elders the church sets aside full time, or the other pastoral staff? These people have a significant role, but ministry is the work *of the saints!* It’s the job of every believer. That means that if you’re a member of CHBC, the holiness and growth of every other member is, in some way, your responsibility. And so is the unity of the whole.

So, what role does supernatural unity have here? It’s the members’ responsibility to disciple one another into greater maturity in Christ, but we can’t fulfill that job if the church is characterized by division, tension, bitterness, avoidance, and selfishness. Unity is the fertile soil in which this building up into maturity can occur.

And counterfeit, “gospel-plus” unity won’t do the job either. Paul says in 1 Cor 12 that there are many parts, yet one body (v. 20), and he has given us different gifts precisely “that there may be no division in the body but that the members may have the same care for one another.” If you only hang out around other ears, then you can’t receive the beneficial influence of the eyes and elbows and toes.

So let’s say we’ve got a church where community is pretty much non-existent, where people show up for the sermon but don’t have much relationship beyond that. Community with no depth. Or let’s say that instead of a church, I’ve got a bunch of old Christian friends from my old sports team and we catch up weekly to hold each other accountable and encourage each other. Community with no breadth. What’s wrong with these?

Well, neither is evidently supernatural. And without supernatural community, we will struggle in our task of evangelism and in our task to present each other mature in Christ. God is amazingly gracious and kind. So I can’t say that we will necessarily fail—but supernatural unity is how God intended us to fulfill the Great Commission.

**VI. Conclusion**

So that’s our introduction to unity that we’ll build on for the rest of the course. Over the next 12 weeks, we’ll be thinking practically about how we can build a church whose unity protects and displays the life-changing message of the gospel. As Psalm 133:1 says, Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! I hope that’s your experience with the fellowship that you’ve tasted in this church – and I hope it’s your prayer that the Lord would grow and preserve our unity here.

**QUESTIONS?**

1. I wonder if this might explain an intriguing pattern in the book of Acts. As you read through Acts, you notice very quickly that nearly always, when the gospel first goes to a new region, it’s accompanied by what Luke calls “miraculous signs.” These signs beg for explanation (e.g. Acts 2:12), and when the explanation comes, it’s the gospel. So the book begins with the sign of tongues at Pentecost as the gospel is first preached in Jerusalem. Then as it goes to Samaria, Luke tells us that “when the crowds heard Phillip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said” (8:6). The rest of the book follows the same pattern: miraculous signs wherever the gospel goes.

   But when the narrative revisits these cities—once local churches exist—it stops describing miraculous signs. Instead, Luke limits his writing to two topics: the further preaching of the gospel and the strengthening of the church.

   What’s going on? Here’s a hypothesis: When the gospel first enters a region, the Spirit enables miraculous signs. Once the gospel takes root, the Spirit enables miraculous community. These miraculous signs were a temporary means of confirming the truth of the gospel. Temporary, until the permanent means of confirmation was up and running: the miraculous community of the local church. And even in 1 Corinthians 14, the one place where we see gifts like tongues in an established church, Paul makes it clear that the priority of gifts is to build up the church. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)