

Eastern Bible Conference 2019 - Young Adults Bible Study

“THAT THEY ALL MAY BE ONE:” A BIBLICAL VIEW OF UNITY

Introduction: In recent times, news reports have highlighted anger, hostile speech, insensitivity, and violence. Many of these behaviors are enacted along national, ethnic, and cultural lines. The ability to have a discussion on these issues is made more complex by terms that carry baggage with them, undermining the clear teaching of Scripture on the distinctions and similarities of all people on the earth.

The fall of Adam and Eve into sin has brought in much that divides humanity. The gospel of Jesus Christ answers to this; but sadly, many professing believers in the gospel have neither historically nor contemporarily demonstrated the reconciliation and unity for which our Savior prayed. National, cultural, and ethnic divides are still evident in the Church of God! The Church’s response internally as well as prophetically has been weak on this front. However, with the Lord's help, we in our generation can be agents of change, unified so that “the world may know.” (See John 17:21, 23.)

SUNDAY – The Problem of Unity

Defining the issues

Regions of Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East, as well as Western countries like the US, Germany, and the UK all have periods in their history which diminished one group of people beneath another. Systemic discrimination and even violence were directed from one group to the diminished people.

Many words are use to describe this condition, and if we are not careful we can embrace the wrong terms and reflect the wrong ideas expressed by them.

Helpful words:

Nation, National - A collection of human beings that live in a specific location that agree to be governed by a set of laws.

Ethnic - unique characteristics common to a group of human beings. This includes skin color, hair texture and other physical traits.

Culture - language, ideas, customs and social behavior of a particular group of people

Oneness, unity - the sharing of common goals, purposes and the pursuit of those goals and purposes; the forming of a complete harmonious whole.

Not so helpful words:

Race, racism - An inappropriate identification of a group of people which by implication implies an inferior-superior relationship

Discrimination - In a good sense it is distinguishing between alternative choices; in a bad

sense, the choice is made on biased, faulty factors, causing harm to others
Prejudice - The prejudgment of a person or matter without the facts.

Origin of nations, peoples, language, and kindred

Genesis 4:17-22 – The origin of cultural distinctive – City living/tent living (v19, 20); Music (v. 21); Craftsmanship (v 22)

Genesis 11:1, 6-8; 10:3, 32

After the flood - the people on earth were of one language - and one purpose. The unity was opposed to God -and the imaginations of man's mind needed to be handled. God confuses the languages - the Lord dispersed people over the face of the earth.

The birth of nations, people, and languages begins here.

Acts 17:26

"And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;"(KJV)

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, (ESV)

There is one gene pool that produces all human beings. Intrinsicly there is a value and worth of every human being because we are “made in the image and likeness of God.”

Other important passages:

Genesis 3:9-19 – The “blame game” failing to take responsibility for actions.

James 4:1, 2 - The source of conflicts, quarrels – from internal passions, unmet desire, envy.

TUESDAY - Prescription for Unity

The Gospel

We have seen the problem of having unity, with disunity resulting from sin. Today we will see that God has a solution, but His is a different approach from everyone else. It will take a review of the human condition before we can discover His prescription.

This is important to recognize because we don't want to bring the mindset of disunity or the wrong approach to unity into our relationships as believers.

The scene starts in Acts 2:1-10. On the Day of Pentecost those from many different nations were in Jerusalem. Some from Rome were included, and they brought the gospel message back to their homes. Later, Paul was used to write the book of Romans for them and for us.

Romans 1:8-13

- We may be established and encouraged together
- The gospel is God's power for *all* who believe, 1:16

Romans 1:17-21; 29-31

- The righteousness and the wrath of God are revealed
- Clarity is available (vv. 19-20), but futile thoughts led to darkened hearts; the mind first, then the heart
- This is the same tactic used today in messaging and advertising from the world
- Then those thoughts lead to actions (vv. 29-31) and affect others

This is one of the wrong prescriptions for unity. The end of Romans 1 pictures everyone being accepted and wrong behavior actually promoted. If unity comes simply by embracing diversity, then man's inhumanity to man has no limits.

The reality is that thoughts have to be captured and transformed. The "strongholds" of 2 Corinthians 10:3 suggest mindsets that have to be resisted and conquered.

Romans 2:1-16

- This is the moralist: cultured, yet inconsistent.
- God judges that person—in fact, judges their secret sins! They are still exposed. This prescription doesn't work either.

Romans 2:17-3:20

- The Jewish nation received advantages and had privilege; they had direct communication from God in the covenant (the law); yet they dishonored God.
- Simply knowing the Word of God is not enough; there is a need to allow its proper impact.
- Ultimately there is a statement of unity, but in a terrible way: **All are guilty** (3:19)!

To review, there are three bad prescriptions:

- 1:32 Let's embrace everything—but that only accentuates the problem.
- 2:16 Let's live morally—but our secrets are still sinful and cause division.
- 2:24 Let's live with God's privilege—but that just makes people even more guilty.

An example of the outcome of privilege is in Numbers 12, when Moses married a woman of a different nationality, ethnicity, and culture, a woman of Cush (Ethiopia). The prejudice of Miriam and Aaron comes immediately to the fore.

Peter also had to learn this in Acts 10: the power of the gospel breaks down walls
...and he had to learn it again in Galatians 2, when even Barnabas was affected

God's prescription

- ...the righteousness of God, by faith in Jesus Christ, to all that believe! Romans 3:22
- All have a need, but all may believe.
- Christians are now all of the same family, with the same Father, all transformed into the same

image by the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18).

Romans continues: we all may be justified; we all may be reconciled; we all may have joy.

Absalom's prescription for unity in 2 Samuel 15 was to make everyone think of themselves. They all united in rebellion behind Absalom. But when that rebellion was put down, true unity was restored when the people thought not of themselves but of David (2 Sam. 15:6, 19:9).

Sin leads to *sins*; we have to deal with the issue of disunity, but we have to do it in God's way.

WEDNESDAY - Power for unity

What does it mean to be "in Christ"?

Being "in Christ" is like the Ground Zero starting point of the Christian life. It has tremendous ramifications and implications. Do we feel inferior? We are in Christ. Do we elevate others? We are in Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:22

-in Christ vs. in Adam

Spiritually, this is the only other "race." We are all of one race and one blood in Adam; but the gospel takes us out of Adam and puts us in Christ. Through the work of the Holy Spirit we are baptized, submerged, into the body of Christ, sealed until the day of redemption (Eph 1:13).

2 Corinthians 5:17

We are now a new creation in Christ. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. This includes poor thinking and biases that have their roots in the fallen condition.

Just as with Ephesians 2:4-6, the contrast is between what we were and what we are.

Alive together with Christ—unity established right away. Divisions are broken, Eph. 2:14.

Romans 6, partakers of His death, burial, and resurrection

2 Peter 1:4, partakers of His divine nature

In Christ refers to our *position*; *with* Christ refers to our *association* with Him.

Other references:

Colossians 1:14 redemption, forgiveness; it's not through ourselves; God sees Christ

Ephesians 2:12-13 far off, now near to God; reconciled, "so very near to God"

1 John 5:11, 13 we have eternal life; it resides in Christ, God's Son

Romans 8:1-2 there is no condemnation; free from law of sin and death
Thus my job is not to accuse others! (cp. Revelation 12, the devil accuses)
We might admonish someone's *behavior*, like Paul with Peter (Gal. 2:14)
 ...but we can never remove the position of someone else
 ...we might correct those out of step (Gal 2:14) but not condemn
 ...Satan tried to accuse Job in terms of his *position* with God
 ...that was rejected; but his *condition* did indeed need adjustment

Contrast between *position* and *condition*, between *position* and *practice*;
some also use the terms *our standing* and *our state*.

2 Corinthians 5:21 justified, the righteousness of God *in Him*

1 Corinthians 1:2 sanctified, set apart for a purpose
You are made like _____ (this) _____, so now live like it.

Colossians 2:9-10 we are complete in Him; acceptance

1 Cor. 2:16, 6:17 one Spirit; we are made one with Him
 We all have the mind of Christ.

These verses reveal that I have no right to treat you as anything less. We are all in the same group and stand on the same footing.

1 Corinthians 12:25-27 same concerns, suffering, and joy

This collective aspect is true. If we don't realize it, how can we get there?

It's true that we might have different stages of appreciation of this truth.

 ...remember that unity is not a practice that can be generated naturally

 ...remember that if preferences are harmful to others, then the preferences are fleshly

Colossians 3:6-11 old facts are replaced by new facts
 We are still here to live this out; but Christ is now all and in all

More passages:

Romans 12:4-5

 One body ... many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

 -Diversity is by design for the body of Christ.

Galatians 3:25-28

 all by faith in Christ Jesus. ... we have put on Christ. ...neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

 -Probably one of the most significant scriptures in this subject, placing our identity in Christ and diminishing our distinctions without eliminating them – the other distinctions

for which poor or no relationships occur at all.

Galatians 6:6

For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision avails anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith which works by love.

-Removes even religious distinctions

THURSDAY – The Practice of Unity

Unity amidst national, ethnic, and cultural diversity

Colossians 3:10-17 sets out both our position and our practice. The standard is being “in Christ”—when Christ is all and is in all.

... held together, bound together in reality and “at heart”

So then, what is the reality for specific situations? One Christian in Colosse was Philemon. Paul wrote a second letter to him, though everyone at Colosse could also read it.

--Philemon’s runaway slave, Onesimus, had been saved through meeting Paul!

--now he is more than a servant; he is a beloved brother

--no distinction in the Lord’s presence (yet still the servant he had been, too)

--“receive him,” Philemon v. 16; restoration, joy, refreshing, vv. 18-19

--overcoming biases of class

Other examples:

Acts 15:36, Paul and Barnabas with John Mark; living from a position of unity

--there was a separation but not a division

--they still appreciated and respected one another: Paul knew Mark was useful (2 Timothy 4) and appreciated Barnabas (1 Corinthians 9:6); Barnabas had not poisoned Mark against Paul

--Peter called Mark his son too; there was no sense of possessiveness (1 Peter 5:13)

James 1-2, overcoming biases of social class and economic status

--James 2:9, no partiality; this was a temptation, 2:1-4, despite unbelieving rich people who defrauded and misused believers, 5:1-6

--James 1:9-10, the lowly and the rich are just the same in God’s presence

Acts 9, Saul needed Barnabas to help him find acceptance in Jerusalem

--his sincerity was questioned because of his history; but now there was reality

--the role of mediator in Barnabas, 9:27

--notice also: Ananias called him “brother Saul” though not wanting to go at first (9:17)

Ephesians 4, 1 Corinthians 12, biases of gift and identity

- all contributing to spiritual growth in the body of Christ, Eph. 4:11-16
- Christ is the goal; each one contributes, including the joints
- Eph. 4:3, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit (note: not unity of the body, which is already settled)
- don't build again the walls that were torn down, 2:14 applied to other divisions
- Eph. 4:1-2, the attitude of lowliness

Acts 6, biases of nationality and heritage

- the Hebrews and Hellenists; Hebrew and Greek speakers of Jewish culture
- all now believers, yet there was inequality and mistrust
- possibly the Hebrews might have simply overlooked the Hellenists (rather than purposely giving less); but an effort in relationship would have prevented that
- and probably the Hellenists were quick to complain and judge motives, assuming it was on purpose when it just needed a simple conversation

John 4, biases of ethnicity and history

- Christ "had to go" through Samaria; intentional connections with others
- she said, "you say" (4:20); this is like saying, "you Jews," "you people;" cultural divides tend to lump people together and then dehumanize them
- Christ was still always Jewish; she was still always from Samaria; yet a new unity came

Ways to change: We have to...

1. **Fellowship differently.** All of us naturally stick with our own friends and those who are like us. But if there is to be a new display of unity, we should intentionally seek out those with differences.
2. **Talk differently.** We have to avoid stereotypes of individuals (true, sometimes cultural traits exist, but we can't type-cast individual believers or prejudge their character; and our own culture takes a back seat to faith).
We have to talk differently also by showing respect for cultural differences. Some have insulted or mocked even the cultural naming traditions of families. And let's stop identifying people by skin color when there is no purpose for doing so. This emphasizes "otherness" instead of unity.
3. **Think differently.** Acknowledge different histories for different individuals and cultures. We will never really know what it's like to be that person. Also, assume that there are legitimate reasons for others to do things (instead of assuming bad motives or bad character).
4. **Respond differently.** If we are endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit, then we must always think of Christians as our brethren together. Christ is all and in all! "Christian" is our first identity. When there are challenges to unity, respond as if we are working together to overcome them rather than from a mindset of "opposite" or "other." This will honor the name of Jesus Christ, who desired us to show unity.

Other important examples:

Ephesians 4:1-7 Biblical unity defined and described

One body – united by the Spirit in a co-dependence of each other (1 Corinthians 12:12-27)

One Spirit – we have been acted upon by a divine person

One hope – shared expectation; and goals

One Lord – we bow to the one who all authority is vested in him

One faith – Common doctrine and response to the doctrine

One baptism – singular identification with Jesus Christ

One God and Father – the single spring, source and supply for unity

Romans 14:2-9 The case of days and diets – Overcoming cultural bias

1 Corinthians 9:18-23 Paul focus on the gospel's message for all – drives him to desire reaching all by his own desire to "build and cross bridges" to reach people different and similar to himself for the gospel's sake

FRIDAY – Prayer and Prospect of Unity

Answered prayer: what heaven looks like

John 17:9-11

The first request in the Lord's prayer is for unity

--unity of the disciples who followed Him

--"that they may be one as We are," He Himself with the Father

How are the Son and the Father one?

--John 14, "if you have seen Me you have seen the Father;" the same character

--in the bosom of the Father always; does what He sees the Father do (1:18; 5:19)

--Hebrews 1, the exact representation of God's character

--one in substance, and one in operation

We have been made one: "He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are one" (Heb. 2:11)

--seeing Jesus in each other will produce unity

This is by the Holy Spirit, who first formed the believers into this united body at Pentecost

--without the Spirit, we are not Christians, Romans 8; with Him, we are united

--and note that all are still distinct Persons of the Godhead

Unity develops also from the "apostles' doctrine," Acts 2:42

-- the apostles were indeed unified in word and action, though also had distinctives

--Jude 3, 17, the faith once delivered to the saints; the body of truth through the teaching of the apostles

John 17:20-23

All generations of believers since then, including ours, have come to faith because of the apostles' word. But again, it's so "they may be one"

--the result is fellowship together, 1 John 1

--the goal is so the world may believe that the Father sent the Son, John 1:21

--it's noticed that we have been with Jesus (4:13) and care about each other (4:32-35)

...this is not Christian socialism (people still had property rights)

...but a historical reality of the depth of relationship and unity that now existed

...this is because of the power of His resurrection, 4:33

--the standard again is "that they may be one as We are"; cp. Col. 3:4, with Christ in God

...and notice all the intricacies of that unity: Christ in us, the Father in Christ, etc.

...and here a special glory is connected with it, John 17:22

--"so the world will know You have sent Me," 17:21

--and so the world knows that we are loved by the Father, 17:23

...operating from a position of being loved changes how we talk about each other

...and the *world* sees the difference; it doesn't affect only ourselves

Distinctions of the Godhead are again seen. Notice that Christ is in us but it doesn't say the Father is in us in that same way. This agrees with other Scriptures (e.g. Christ dwelling in our hearts by faith, Eph. 3:17; Christ in you, the hope of glory, Col. 1:27).

--We don't lose our individuality as believers. Goals of Eastern religions include a loss of desire and identity as one tries to become one with a universal divine consciousness. Christianity makes us one while encouraging us to express unity as uniquely ourselves.

John 5 describes witnesses that the Father sent the Son

--including the Lord's own works, the Father's testimony, and the Scriptures

--yet now we are added to those witnesses when we display unity

Romans 15:5-7, Colossians 2:1-4

Not just the Lord Jesus prayed this way; Paul prayed this way too. We should all join in the prayer for unity. Every generation has to recapture these truths and practice them.

Revelation 5:9-10

--Every tribe, tongue, people, and nation will be represented, and all can still be identified.

--The prayer of the Lord for unity was in a way answered at Pentecost; and in another way, it will finally be fulfilled in heaven. But in the present, we have the opportunity to live out this truth.

2 Corinthians 3:18

We all are transformed as we behold the glory of the Lord.

Romans 6-7

This passage reviews the reality of the sinful nature, which includes the natural tendency for disunity and division. We have to walk in this truth rather than in the flesh.

John 17

The Lord addresses God as Father, then Holy Father (and emphasizes our sanctification), and Righteous Father (and emphasizes that we are in the world but not of it).

--Whenever I allow differences to divide me from brothers or sisters, I deny that name!

Ephesians 4:3, endeavor!