

The Church Is United in the Gospel

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: God unites the church by the gospel of Jesus Christ, the one thing that binds us together amid great diversity.

BACKGROUND PASSAGES: 1 Corinthians 1; John 17

In *Remember the Titans*, a movie based on the true story of T. C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1971, Denzel Washington plays Coach Herman Boone. In this movie adaptation, Coach Boone is in his first year of coaching a newly integrated football team. What makes this story so powerful is that it shows how a divided team and coaching staff go from fierce discord to strong unity rooted in mutual friendship. As a result of this transformation, the team goes undefeated and wins the state title.

The turning point for the team comes when Coach Boone forces the young men to go on a grueling run to the Gettysburg cemetery. While they are bent over gasping for air, Boone gives a persuasive speech that starts by revealing that the team is standing on sacred ground where fifty thousand men died, in his words, “fighting the same fight that we’re still fighting amongst ourselves.” Boone goes on to say, “If we don’t come together right now on this hallowed ground, we too will be destroyed just like they were.”



What motivations for unity might the world give?

Group Time

Point 1: The church is to be united (1 Cor. 1:10-13).

¹⁰ Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers and sisters, by members of Chloe's people, that there is rivalry among you. ¹² What I am saying is this: One of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." ¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in Paul's name?

Like a young adult who goes off to college and begins to lose his or her reason and focus, the church in Corinth was swerving away from what was important. They had been rescued by the death and resurrection of Christ and for the purpose of glorifying God. But the church members were living as if they had been saved to build their identity around their favorite apostle or leader. Paul called the church back to reality and to unity in what matters.



Over what kinds of trivial matters do you see Christians most often grow divisive?

Paul emphasized that those who rallied to him for identity did so foolishly since Paul was not crucified for them, neither were any of them baptized in his name. In other words, since only Christ died for them, Christ was the only One to whom they belonged. Scripture teaches our union with Christ, not our union with Paul, Apollos, Cephas, or any other leader (Col. 3:1-4). In a day and age dominated by charismatic pastors with huge followings on social media, we must know ourselves to belong wholly to Christ. And we must beware of schisms and divisions, like those in Corinth.



Why are people prone to identify more strongly with certain personalities and public figures than with Christ Himself?

Point 2: The church is to be united by the gospel (1 Cor. 1:17-18).

¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ will not be emptied of its effect.

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but it is the power of God to us who are being saved.

Unity is not uniformity; unity in the church consists of possessing common allegiance to the same core beliefs and values—to Jesus and the gospel—even while there are differences among us. In 1 Corinthians 1:13, the apostle Paul asked, “Is Christ divided?” The obvious answer to this question is “no.” Paul knew of Jesus’ presence in heaven and His existence in one piece. So Paul’s point was that if Christ is not divided, then neither should the church act divisively because the church is His body.

Voices from the Church

“If a choir is singing in great harmony, it’s not because they are singing the same parts; it’s because they’re adding their part to the same song. It is the goal that produces the unity. Unity is not sameness. Unity has to do with same purpose.”¹

—Tony Evans

Unity of the Church: Christ’s desire for the church is that we be united as one in Him by the _____, reflecting the _____ of our trinitarian God. As such, we are to allow for no divisions to separate us, such as ethnicity, socioeconomics, nationality, language, politics, or secondary doctrinal beliefs. Our objective is not simply to work around or look past these differences within the body of Christ but to celebrate the _____ of God’s people made one in _____.

Paul’s gospel included the life, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and return of Christ. It is the good news of the kingdom of God’s available to all who look to Christ in faith and repent of their sins. But here Paul has a particular focus on “the cross of Christ.” In Corinth, the preaching of the cross divided the hearers into two groups: those who are perishing and those who are being saved. Those who are in Christ by faith see the cross as wisdom and beauty. Everyone else sees the cross as foolish and worthless.



How does the gospel serve to unify the church?

Point 3: The church is to be united by the gospel to show the world Jesus' power (1 Cor. 1:19-21; John 17:20-23).

¹⁹ For it is written,

I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and I will set aside the intelligence of the intelligent.

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the debater of this age? Hasn't God made the world's wisdom foolish? ²¹ For since, in God's wisdom, the world did not know God through wisdom, God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of what is preached.

In verse 19, Paul quoted Isaiah 29:14. There Isaiah warned the Kingdom of Judah that God would judge them for relying on the intelligence of the world rather than Him, the all-seeing and all-knowing Creator. Paul then continued with a flurry of questions to make the point that both Greek philosophers and Jewish teachers who reject the cross—who see themselves as wise—are fools in comparison with God. True wisdom is found in believing, being saved by, and nurtured through the preaching of the cross.

²⁰ “I pray not only for these, but also for those who believe in me through their word.

²¹ May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me. ²² I have given them the glory you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one. ²³ I am in them and you are in me, so that they may be made completely one, that the world may know you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me.

In John 17:20-23, Jesus made it clear as He prayed to God that His parting desire was that His people—the church—would be one. His motivation behind this prayer is that the world would know that God sent Him and that He is the Christ. A unified church in the twenty-first century that is standing on the gospel and bearing fruit will be an attractive community to people who live in a culture of disconnectedness, discouragement, and drama. A church that is united is a church, as Jesus prayed, that is moving and living as one.



How does unity in the church support her mission of making Jesus known throughout the world?

Daily Study

Day 1: Read 1 Corinthians 1:1-13

Often when we receive negative reports regarding Christians whom we love, our first response can be to reach out to the person and address the issue without deep reflection. While confronting a person in sin or error is needed, it is also important for us to consider how we confront them. The Bible tells us that as Christians, our desire should be to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) and to do so with a humble posture that seeks to build up and restore (Gal. 6:1-5). Our confrontation should be done within the framework of the gospel, acknowledging the sin but also our great Savior who offers forgiveness and peace through His cross.

In 1 Corinthians 1:1-13, though the church at Corinth was experiencing schisms and theological error, Paul confronted them in a way that would lead to hope. Notice how Paul referred to them as saints over whom Jesus is Lord (v. 2). He gave thanks to God for them, remembering the many ways that he was encouraged by them. He showed confidence in God's faithfulness toward them to the end. And only after doing so, did Paul dive into the corrective aspects of his letter. In most of his letters (except Galatians, on account of the urgent matter of refuting the Judaizers), Paul modeled this type of gospel leadership.

 Do you have a relational strain with a fellow Christian because you believe he or she is in error? Make a list of the evidences of grace that you see in his or her life and pray a prayer of thanksgiving over that person today.



Voices from Church History

"The church of God is, namely, the multitude of saints called and made holy through Christ Jesus ... Since this sanctification and this calling to holiness do not take place in the name of some minister or teacher or baptizer, but in the name of Christ, therefore Paul appropriately calls them 'those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints.'"³

—Wolfgang Musculus
(1497-1563)

Day 2: Read 1 Corinthians 1:14-18

It seems strange that Paul would thank God that he had not baptized people (vv. 14-15). Paul's point in making this statement was not to suggest that baptism is unimportant; rather, it was that people should not seek to identify with the person who baptized them because their only saving union is with Christ. Paul wanted the focus of his ministry to be Christ, not himself. He had a role to play in the body at Corinth just like everyone else. In championing our union with Christ, Paul's role was to plant, Apollos's was to water, but God is the One who brought the increase (1 Cor. 3:6-7).

No matter what stage of life we are in as Christians, our goal should be to imitate Paul by seeking to make Jesus famous and not ourselves. This happens when our eyes are transfixed on Him rather than ourselves. Only when we look to Christ are we free to find our true identity and experience lasting joy, power, and rest within.



Why should we value our union with Christ over all other associations and relationships?

Day 3: Read 1 Corinthians 1:19-31

If you and I were God and we wanted to save people from every nation, tribe, and tongue to confess us as Lord, we would probably recruit the most intelligent, charming, and well-known people to carry our message. Yet this is not how God has chosen to save His people from their sin. Instead, Paul stated that God typically does not save the “best and the brightest” (see v. 26). God typically saves those who come from ordinary and humble situations. God chose “what is insignificant and despised in the world” to bring redemption (vv. 28-29).

As disciples of Jesus, we must live with this understanding: God saved us not because He needed us or because of our accomplishments but for His own glory. May we never boast in pride or wallow in self-pity; instead, may our boast be in our great Savior who became wisdom for us—our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (vv. 30-31).



What are some ways you are tempted to boast in yourself? How will you fight that temptation and give all glory to God your Savior?

Day 4: Read John 17:1-19

You can tell a lot about people based on what they do and where they go in the most difficult of times. In Jesus' last hours, before the mock trials, we see Him drawing near to the Father through prayer. It's in these last occasions of prayer that we see His persistence and primary concerns.

In John 17:1-19, Jesus revealed through what is often called His “high priestly prayer” the things that to Him were “worth dying for.” If Jesus spent time praying for the unity of the church, among other things, just before His crucifixion, then this should tell us that walking in unity is not something we should take for granted. Just as bad as we want to see lost people come to know Jesus, we must desire to see the church walk in unity, beginning with our own local churches.



Is praying for the unity of your church a priority? Why or why not? Spend some time praying for this now.

Day 5: Read John 17:20-26

Several motivations should encourage Christians to be united, which Jesus' high priestly prayer addresses. For one, the unity of the body points people to the glory that Jesus and the Father share. But the unity of the church also serves as a compelling witness to the world.

In the wake of the Los Angeles race riots of 1992, Rodney King, a central figure in the situation that sparked the riot, asked a pertinent question at the time: “Can't we all get along?” The honest answer is no. Because of the fall, human beings evaluate each other in a divisive way. However, in Christ, the answer should be yes because Christ has torn down the wall of hostility and built together “one new man”—the church (Eph. 2:11-22). So, when the church experiences disunity, people outside of the church are not compelled to long for what believers are experiencing. When the church focuses on the finished work of Christ, however, she experiences a supernatural unity. It's this supernatural unity that should lead our lost coworkers, friends, family members, and neighbors to become curious and desire to know more about the community and communion that we share as the body of Christ, the family of God.



What benefits of church unity seem most attractive to you?

