

# Maintaining Church Unity

M. W. Bassford, 8-8-10

I don't think it's any secret to anyone that our congregation has been growing recently. As a symptom of this, just look at what's happened to our Sunday morning attendance. A few years ago, on an average Sunday, we could expect to have about 85 people here. Now, the typical Sunday morning attendance is about 110, all in all, about a 20 percent increase. Some of that has been due to our recent baby boom, some of it has been due to Christians from other congregations placing membership here, but my impression is that the bulk of it has come from good old-fashioned evangelism. We know, of course, that it is God who gives the increase, and we must be thankful for His work here.

However, even such a tremendous blessing as this also contains the potential for future problems. Satan likes it when churches are either dead or on their way, and a strong, growing church is about his least favorite thing on earth, because we pose such a threat to his dominion. He knows that together we are strong, but separated we are weak, so he is certain to do everything in his power to separate us. He wants the Christians who have been members here for a while to be cold and standoffish, so that visitors and newer members feel unwelcome. He wants us to be clannish and never open up to anyone outside of our extended families. He wants us to be gossipy and suspicious of our brethren, expecting them to reach out to us instead of reaching out to them first. If the devil can accomplish these things in our church, all he has to do is sit back and wait, because sooner or later, we're going to have a church split that will put us where he wants us.

Naturally, there's nothing new about any of these diabolical strategies. God's word both warns us about their dangers and tells us how we can counteract them. New Testament writers as different as James and Paul both address the problem. Let's see how we can apply their timeless wisdom as we consider maintaining church unity.

## Partiality

One of the biggest threats to church unity is the problem of partiality. James begins his discussion of this issue in James 2:1-4. The example that James chooses here to advance his message is that of showing partiality to the rich. This problem, of course, is still very much among us. We live in a society that is so materialistic that when we talk about a "successful" man, everyone understands that we're talking about a wealthy man. Conversely, in the eyes of many Americans, poverty carries with it a stigma of failure, as though only someone who is lazy and ignorant could also be poor. This assumption, of course, is monstrously unfair, but it is the way that we will think if we're not careful.

When we are partial, whether it is because of wealth or family connections or social status or anything else, James tells us that we have become judges with evil thoughts. Basically, because of our partiality, we have put ourselves in the place of God. Here's how this works: sometimes, we as a church are required to withdraw from some Christians or not admit others into fellowship in the first place. As a congregation, we simply cannot align ourselves with willful, unrepentant sinners, and we can't do it because God has commanded us not to. When we remove the wicked from among ourselves, we aren't acting as judges. We are executing the judgment that our Lord has already pronounced. However, God does not command us to treat the poor badly, or the stranger badly. Indeed, the opposite is true. Thus, when we honor some and dismiss others outside of His law, we have rejected His judgment in favor of our own.

This obviously constitutes rebellion against God's authority, but that's not the only problem with it. James continues on to explain in James 2:5-7. It would be bad enough if favoring the rich or whoever was some idea that we came up with ourselves, but it's not. In fact, partiality represents a worldly mindset, and in this context, James is reminding us of the ways that we should be thinking. First off, we must recognize that it is the poor who are often most receptive to the gospel. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1, there weren't many in the Corinthian church who were well esteemed by the world. There were a few, but not many. At a guess, this is because a lot of rich people have enough that they're happy just the way they are. They don't feel discontented, they aren't looking for anything better, so they don't want anything to do with being saved or with going to heaven. However, an awful lot of poor people are looking for something better. James' point is that when we're rude to them, we're driving away those who are most likely to listen.

Second, it is the rich who are most likely to sign on as enemies of Christians and Christianity. Let's ask ourselves: who is it that's behind the push for teaching evolution in our schools, that's behind the explosion of filth and ungodly behavior on TV? Is it a bunch of poor folks in their trailers in Arkansas? Of course not! It's the PhD's in the universities, the executives in Hollywood, in short, the intellectual and cultural elite of our society. It's the haves sneering at the have-nots and telling them what they need to believe. Those people may be glamorous, but they're not our friends.

However, partiality isn't bad just because it's rebellious and because it's foolish. It's bad because it misses the basic point of Christianity. Look with me at James 2:8-11. James here repeats the commandment that Jesus selected as the second most important in the entire Law of Moses, and it is no less significant to our faith. When we show partiality, it is this royal law that we are violating. We're loving some of our neighbors as ourselves, but treating the rest like dirt.

This might not seem like a big deal, especially to Christians who are being partial. We might say to ourselves, "I'm not such a bad guy. Sure, I was a jerk to that stranger, but I'm not going around cussing or cheating on my wife, so I'm basically OK." James disagrees. His point is that being unloving is a sin, just like any other sin, and we are not any better than any other sinners just because that's our sin of choice. Partiality will destroy us just as surely as any sin.

In fact, in some ways it's worse to be partial and unloving. We see why in James 2:12-13. As James points out, we are under the law of Christ, what he calls here "the law of liberty". Our salvation under this law is explicitly not a matter of works. Instead, every Christian relies entirely on the grace and the mercy of God. When we show partiality, we fail to extend to others the mercy that we so desperately need from our Creator. Understandably, God takes a very dim view of such rank hypocrisy. Every one of us, then, must make sure that we show the same courtesy and the same love to everyone under this roof. We need to make a point of reaching out to those we don't know very well. We need to embrace the people who seem isolated. Above all, we must take care never to substitute our own judgments for God's. Someone might be insignificant or even repulsive in our eyes, but their souls are precious in God's eyes.

## **Self-Will**

As great a problem as partiality is, it's no more significant than the problem of self-will. Basically, self-will is the wrong answer to the question, "Why am I here?" If we are a part of this church not for what we can give, but for what we can get; if we are more interested in being fed ourselves than in feeding others; if we are concerned with bringing glory to ourselves instead of glorifying God, that's self-will, and it is dismayingly common in the church.

Paul presents this righteous alternative to this unrighteous mindset in Philippians 2:1-4. This text boils down to two basic commandments: We must have the same mind, and we must have a lowly mind. The first of these commandments tells us that we much cherish unity. As a congregation, we must be on the same page, and we must be headed in the same direction. When we grumble and fuss and gossip about the decisions the church leadership has made, that only pleases the devil. In the long run, it is far more important for the church to be united than for us to get our way.

The second commandment tells us that we must cherish humility. Who can say how many Christians have done the right thing for the wrong reason, who preach or lead singing for the praise they get, who want to "serve" as elders or deacons for the prestige of the position, who want to determine the direction the church is headed to prove their own wisdom? Sooner or later, such a self-centered man, or woman for that matter, will create strife in the church when he feels that his position is being threatened. From beginning to end, though, he never pleased God. If we do wish to please Him, we must be willing to serve even if no one notices, so that all the glory goes straight to Him.

In this, as in so many other things, our example is Jesus. Consider with me Philippians 2:5-8. In both His unity with the purposes of God and in His self-sacrificing humility, Jesus taught us how we need to be. Clearly, Jesus' descent to earth and the cross was not a course that our Savior would have chosen for Himself. After all, it required Him to give up everything: His life in heaven, His high position, even His life itself. I have trouble imagining a more difficult road for a man to walk, but Jesus walked it without a single deviation from the plan, without a single murmur or complaint.

None of us are tried as harshly as Jesus was, yet we so often fail in imitating the example of His selflessness. Our efforts in the Lord's work get overlooked, so we get mad and won't work anymore until we receive the praise that we think is due us. The elders take the church in a different direction than we think it should go, so we embark on a grumbling campaign about it. A brother says or does something to us that could be taken the wrong way, so we take it in the worst possible way and assassinate his character at every opportunity. There are millions of examples of misconduct I could string through here, but they all have one thing in common. None of them are what a true disciple would do.

Paul points to two solutions for this problem of self-will. The first emerges in Philippians 2:12-13. Usually, when Christians become proud, part of what's going on in their heads is that they're not too worried about their relationship with God. They think that they're headed straight for heaven, and they'll be able to maintain that course with only minimal effort, so they've got all this extra effort to spare for self-promotion. Brethren, there's not a Christian in this room who can set the cruise control and expect to stay right with God. Discipleship requires effort. In fact, it requires all of the effort we've got if we want to bear fruit as God expects, and just as soon as we start devoting effort to our own vainglory instead, that inevitably cripples our spiritual production. If we simply buckle down and work on improving our walk with God, that should soak up all the energy we have to spare and keep us out of trouble.

Second, we should watch our mouths. Paul raises this point in Philippians 2:14-16. All diseases have symptoms, and one of the main symptoms of the disease of self-will is complaining and disputing. If we never have anything good to say to or about our brethren, that points to a pride problem. If we can't hear the elders make a plan for changing a light bulb without wanting to argue with them about it, that points to a pride problem. If we perceive ourselves as the only reasonable Christian left, and the whole rest of the congregation is either stupid or evil, that points to a pride problem.

We need, then, to bridle our tongues. Before the first syllable of a comment escapes our lips, we need to analyze it to make sure that it's wholesome. If it isn't, we need to swallow it and begin the work of correcting our hearts too.