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**What Does
Unity in the Church
Look Like?**

**TEN TRUTHS FROM
EPHESIANS 4**

**DR. VICTORY
GODSPOWER**
(International President)



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And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

— **Ephesians 4:11–16** —

Few things are more important for growth as a Christian than learning how to walk in unity with others. And, at the same time, few things more confused than discussions about unity in the church today. Indeed, how many seek Christian unity without the foggiest idea of what Scripture says about the church, and thus they seek unity in the church with definitions and desires formed without the light of Scripture.

Still, unity in the church is a goal that biblical churches must pursue. Jesus prayed for it (**John 17**), and Jesus died

for it (**Ephesians 2**). And thankfully, Scripture speaks of it in passages like Ephesians 4. Therefore, consider ten truths that we find in Ephesians about what church unity is and is not.

1. **Unity is a gift from God.**
2. **Unity is maintained, not created by man.**
3. **Unity grows over time.**
4. **Unity is most opposed by pride and self-interest.**
5. **Unity is a uniquely Christian adornment.**
6. **Unity requires a doctrinal center – the gospel.**
7. **Unity does not mean uniformity.**
8. **Unity depends on grace and gifts.**
9. **Unity grows when it is stretched, pressured, and even threatened.**
10. **Unity glorifies God and attracts unbelievers.**

Ten Truths About Church Unity

1. Unity is A Gift From God.

In **Ephesians 2**, Paul explains how unity comes as a result of salvation. This means, unity among fellow Christians is a gift of grace, just like salvation itself. As **Ephesians 2:13–16** teaches, Jews and Gentiles were made “one new man” by the death and resurrection of Christ. And now in the church of a myriad of nations, unity continues to be a gracious gift.

In this way, unity among believers is not just a luxury item, like heated seats or entertainment system. Rather, unity in Christ and unity in the body of Christ is what the church *is*. While we struggle to experience unity in the church; it is the gift God gives to his church and thus it is something we must pursue.

2. Unity is Maintained, Not Created by Man.

Because unity is a gift from God, the church is called to maintain unity, not create it. **Ephesians 4:3** calls us to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Notice, Paul doesn't say, “find,” or “create,” or “produce” unity, but maintain the unity that he has created and given.

With the oneness heart given by the Spirit, we are to maintain the unity God gives us. That is, in remembering the peace God has given to us in salvation, we are to pursue peace and seek unity

with the power God gives us by his Spirit. **Romans 12–14**, **1 Corinthians 8–14**, **Ephesians 4–5**, and **Colossians 3** are all written for this purpose—for men and women united in Christ to learn how to maintain God's gift of spiritual unity. *

3. Unity Grows Over Time.

Or, at least, unity in the church should grow over time. Notice how verse 3 begins with stress on maintaining unity. But verse 13 says, “. . . until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” So, in Paul's words, we learn unity is not a static thing.

Indeed, unity is something every church should pray for and grow in, as it gives itself to the truth of the gospel and the love that comes from the triune God. Truly, growth in unity is the work of God. As **Ephesians 3** teaches us, it is the result of prayer and the fullness of the Spirit. But again, this is what the church *is*—a people filled with the Spirit, commissioned to love one another, and proclaim gospel truth.

Wonder why regenerate membership matters? Because only a true church (one comprised of born again believers) can approach this kind of unity.

4. Unity is Most Opposed by Pride and Self-Interest.

To put it positively, unity is maintained by humility, gentleness, patience and enduring love (**Ephesians 4:2**). Without these “garments of grace,” the richest doctrine and the best structures will fail.

Therefore, we must behold with increasing wonder the gentleness, humility, and love of Christ. Only as we adore those traits in him—rather than the arrogant bravado of our world leaders and entertainment stars—will those spiritual fruits take root in our life. But when they do, when love roots our pride and gentleness replaces impatience, then we will see unity catalyzed in the church. *May God give us such humble hearts!*

5. Unity is AUniquely Christian Adornment.

In truth, there are all sorts of things and causes that unify people: every four years, our nation is united around the Olympics; every time, politicians unite people around their platforms (even divide their opponents); and every day, people join clubs, gyms, fraternities, and organizations *because* of certain external affinities.

But this is what makes the church unique is how our unity is based on the invisible realities of God, and not anything visible to the natural man. Christian unity is based upon the Triune God and the work of salvation he has done in us.

Thus, when churches try to grow themselves by appealing to certain external factors— e.g., style of music, ethnic heritage, age, occupation, socio-economic status, etc— they unify the church around worldly items. Or at least, they unify the church around things that the world can also create—and often creates better than the church.

By contrast, the unity described in **Ephesians 4** is fundamentally different. It is something the world cannot create, nor can it explain. It is the unity of once-crucified Lord who is sending his Spirit to raise dead people to life and fill them with his love. In short, it is gospel unity that has no earthly explanation.

In fact, a unity in church that is explainable through purely sociological factors, fails to display the inexplicable power of God. Therefore, we ought to strive for unity that only comes from God and only comes through gospel of Jesus Christ and prayer in the Spirit.

6. Unity Requires ADoctrinal Center – The Gospel.

In **Ephesians 4:4–6**, the word *one* is listed seven times. In these same verses, each member of the Godhead is mentioned. And thus the unity of God is expressed in these core elements of the gospel.

After stressing the need for “garments of grace” to clothe the church, Paul speaks about the underlying commitments of a unified church. He

explains that there is one body and one Spirit. There cannot be a division between Jew and Gentile, Israel and the Church, because they have the same Spirit.

Likewise, there is one hope, because there is one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. That is to say, there is one way of salvation centered on Jesus Christ; there is one faith for all delivered to the saints (**Jude 3–4**); and there is one baptism in the Spirit by which all men and women are unified to Christ (**1 Corinthians 12:12–13**).

Then, there is only “one God and Father, who is over all, through all, and in all” (v. 6). Just as the one Spirit and the one Lord stress gospel unity, the single father means the church is one large family, adopted together in Christ.

Put this all together, and we find that the message of the gospel centered on Jesus Christ is the unifying doctrine of the church. The more a church elevates this message and tests all doctrines by the gospel, the more it will grow in unity—not to mention maturity. At the same time, the more a church elevates peripheral issues, the more it will divided itself and/or make itself inhospitable for believers who are different from themselves.

7. Unity Does Not Mean Uniformity.

As we see in verse 7, Paul stresses that the unified body has many various gifts. And here the gifts are people (see vv. 8–11). Indeed, because the gospel unites people from every nation, every

race, every language and culture, it unites people that the world cannot and won't unite. Amazingly, the gospel unites racist and racial activist, it unites killer and victim, it unites the self-righteous and wanton sinner, and it conjoins the churched and the unchurched.

In sum, by confining us all to disobedience sin (**Romans 11:32**)—no one is righteous, not one! (**Romans 3:10–12**)—and then by uniting us to Christ by his death and resurrection (**Romans 6:3–6**) and destroying the wall of hostility that stands between us (**Ephesians 2:15**), God has fitted together with all kinds protruding spikes and rough edges. This is not by accident, but on purpose. In saving all kinds of people, God gets greater glory; and by joining us together in the same local church, he teaches us how to walk in unity, as we grow in humility, gentleness, patience, and love.

This plan, laid out in **Ephesians 2 and 4**, then means unity is not uniformity. It does not mean everyone looks the same, talks the same, or thinks the same. It means, however, that because we believe the same gospel, we can abide in grace together learning how to accentuate gospel truth.

8. Unity Depends on Grace And Gifts.

Still, unity is never satisfied with lowest common denominator co-existence. Rather, the goal of unity is to grow up

together in Christ. That is unity leads to maturity, and maturity fosters greater unity. And to facilitate this, God has given gifts to the church.

Again verse 7 stresses the way in which the Lord personally and intentionally gives gifts to the church. Christ is building his body, and he knows exactly how he wants it shaped. Therefore, he uniquely redeems and repurposes people in the church.

Even more, we know Christ is working to shape each member of his church, and he is shaping us through one another. Now, this means that our sins dent and damage others, but it also means that the sins of others will scar us and send us back to our gracious head. Still, the point of Ephesians 4 is to stress how the members of the body are given to build one another up.

That is to say, in local assemblies, we find gifted people committed to serving one another. Through these gifts, God leads the church to grow in biblical maturity, which in turn facilitates greater unity.

In **Ephesians 4:11**, Paul starts with apostles, prophets, evangelists, and teachers, as the foundation stones of this growth process. As Jesus taught that the Word is the source of sanctification (**John 17:17**), Paul stresses the teaching ministry—first those men used by God in the first century to lay down a good foundation (Apostles, Prophets, and Evangelists),

and now through the centuries, Christ has given pastor-teachers who build on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (see **Ephesians 2:20**).

Thus, the whole church is built upon God's word, and the saints are equipped to use their gifts to build up the body as the pastor-teachers teach and explain the Bible to them. In this way, the whole church is built up in love, with the result being a body that grows together in maturity.

All of this confirms the truth, that true unity depends on leavening effect of God's Word. And thus churches who want to grow in true unity, must press into the Bible and let the Bible press into every corner of their lives. This is how unity grows, as gifts believers “do the word.

9. Unity Grows When it is Stretched, Pressured, Even Threatened.

Now this may be the most difficult truth to get or embrace, but it is the most important and it protects earnest Christians from being overly jaded with (dis)united churches.

In a world filled with devils, and in churches that range in maturity and cultural background, church unity will only come through seasons of disunity and difficulty. In other words, because unity is contingent on maturity, unity and maturity are a process that takes time.

Unity is not a peace that falls on the church; it is the product of the church growing up in love. Consider again the words of **Ephesians 4:15–16**,

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Does that kind of unity sound easy? Construction is not easy. Forming new habits is hard. And forming new life is even more so—just ask a pregnant mother.

In the process of church growth, unity is not a given. It is the result of Spirit-empowered labor. It is something, therefore, God must do in his church over time, and this process of unity and maturity is often filled with pain.

When I was in middle school, I grew 12 inches in less than 3 years. As a result, my back ached every step of the way—literally. Growing pains are just that, they *pains* that result in growth.

I think sometimes, we expect that because Jesus prayed for unity, anything that looks like disunity is a disappointment. Yet, this is why he prayed, because he is growing his church in unity. So, remember, disunity is a necessary step on the way to unity, just like bodies grow strong when they push against heavy weights, so unity must always come thru resistance training.

10. Unity Glorifies God And Attracts Unbelievers.

When it is all said and done, gospel-centered, humble-hearted unity glorifies God. It glorifies God, because it can only come through the cross of Christ—the pinnacle of his praise. And it glorifies God, because it demands members of the body, to die to self too and to live a life empowered by the Spirit.

In this way, Christ gets the glory for what he did once and for all on the cross. And the Spirit of Christ gets the glory as he completes the work of Christ in the life of his church. And all this is seen in the church, because it is the locus where the glory of God is witnessed today.

Even more, when the church is unified in gospel truth and humble love, it will display to unbelievers *what the gospel does*. In truth, the gospel is a message of grace, news that is heard not seen. But when that message is believed by a community of faith, and that community covenants to love one another, it makes the audible, visible—and the power, wisdom, and goodness of God is seen.

For that reason, pursuing church unity is worth the effort, because it results in *seeing* Christ glorified on earth. And when that happens it strengthens believers and draws unbelievers to God's power, love, and wisdom. Therefore, let us continue to understand what church unity is and isn't and to seek it with the power of God's Spirit.



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It's always my pleasure to serve you and thanks for your continued support to The Platform International. Keep us in your prayers always and welcome to the month of April 2023.

Yours In His Vineyard

Dr Victory Godspower
(TPI International President)



FOR MORE ENQUIRIES
CONTACT:

45, Georginia Street, Horizon
Rooderpoort. 1724, Johannesburg,
South Africa.

☎ +27 102 134 388

✉ info@theplatforminternational.org

🌐 www.theplatforminternational.org

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