

## LESSON 10

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# Building Unity in the Local Church

Unity is a powerful force; just ask any military commander, business executive, athletic coach, national president, or pastor. Charles Swindoll describes a cartoon showing two characters. One is a timid-looking man who sits alone, watching television. The other is a headstrong woman who storms into the room and demands that he change the channel to a show she wants to watch. He sheepishly asks what makes her think she can just take over. She shows him her tightened fist and forcefully mutters, "These five fingers!" The threat works. In meek obedience, the man changes the television and silently slips out of the room. He looks down at his own five fingers and asks, "Why can't you guys get organized like that?" (Swindoll 1998, 599).

Indeed, united we stand and divided we fall. A church that is united in worship, ministry, and vision will accomplish much for the kingdom of God. That same church can also be destroyed by factions and judgment. As a pastor, I have experienced the wonderful fruits of unity as well as the bitterness of division. It is imperative that congregations be unified in ministry and mission.

When it comes to unity, every believer has a choice, every church a mandate, and every leader a challenge. Attaining and maintaining unity is never-ending. The goal for any leader is to see the congregations unified and strong. Too often leaders experience what a forgetful pastor once encountered. He and his wife invited all of the elderly women to a very special garden tea party. At the last minute, he realized he had forgotten to invite one of the faithful church ladies. He quickly called her just hours before the party and invited her to attend. She declined his invitation and matter-of-factly said, "It is no use. I've already prayed for rain!"

As Christians, we need to foster compassion and unity such as was present at the Seattle Special Olympics a few years ago. Nine contestants, all physically or mentally disabled, assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. At the gun they all started running, not exactly in a dash, but with the goal to run the race to the best of their ability. All headed for the finish line except for one boy who stumbled on the asphalt, tumbled a couple of times, and began to cry. As the other eight heard the boy's sobs, they slowed down. They turned around and went back—every one of them. One girl with Down's syndrome bent down, kissed him, and said, "This will make it better." Then all nine linked arms and walked together to the finish line. Everyone in the stadium stood; the cheering continued for ten minutes.

Unity is not only powerful but beautiful. When believers lock arms with one another and cross the finish line together, all of heaven rejoices. Unity is not easy to accomplish, but each of us—with the direction of God's Word and wisdom of the Spirit—can be a catalyst for unity in the church. Let us prepare our hearts as we go through this lesson.

## LESSON OUTLINE

- Defining Unity
- Defending Unity
- Developing Unity
- Displaying Unity
- Discovering Its Potential

## LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. *Define unity from a practical and biblical perspective.*
2. *Identify the attacks against unity.*

3. *Discuss how unity is developed in the believer and the church.*
4. *Show how humility, gentleness, and love aid in building unity.*
5. *Describe how unity impacts evangelism.*

## Defining Unity

### *Objective 1:*

*Define unity from a practical and biblical perspective.*

The New Testament word translated “unity” comes from the Greek word *henotēs* and is found in two verses in Ephesians: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3) and “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). Clearly, unity is an important goal for which all Christians must strive. Unity should never be an afterthought or a low priority aim.

### Unity Starts with God

The idea of unity actually starts with God. God is one; there is none beside Him. Although there are three eternal members of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—God is One. There is never disunity in the Trinity. Our love and devotion to the Lord, likewise, must be undivided. Jesus said, for instance, that we cannot serve both God and money (Matthew 6:24). We are commanded to flee from anything that turns us from serving the One True God (1 John 5:21).

### Genuine Unity through Christ

Christian unity goes beyond human relationships. Our unity with other believers is established by our spiritual connection to Jesus Christ. He brings us into fellowship through His sacrifice on the Cross, atoning blood, redemptive grace, and powerful resurrection. He

binds us together by His Spirit and gives us a common yet divine purpose, promise, and future.

You may have seen an old Frankenstein movie. A mad scientist pieces together body parts from various cadavers, gives the ghastly assembly a jolt of electricity, and—presto—one evil monster, ready for action! The church is compared to one body, but it is not produced by simply combining various anatomical parts, like the Frankenstein monster. Rather, the body of Christ derives its existence and life from its Head, Jesus Christ. A typical human organization derives its power from the association of individuals. The body of Christ derives its power from the sharing of divine life. Christ makes His body, the church, powerful!

The New Testament links many aspects of our Christian experience to God's essential unity and our oneness with Christ. We are one Body in function and purpose. We have one hope of eternal life. The believer's allegiance, dedication, and commitment are founded in one Lord. The foundation of our trust, assurance, and gospel is rooted in one faith. The process of spiritual regeneration and purification happens only by one baptism. And, we serve one God—the universal Father, exalted King, Creator of all things (Ephesians 4:4–6).

### Unity Is Not Uniformity

Unity is not uniformity. Followers of Jesus Christ are not like cookies cut by the same cookie cutter or like wooden blocks cut to exact precision and detail. Our unity is not founded in a theology of dressing, talking, or looking alike. God has not designed us to be robots or clones. Instead God wants to use the unique qualities of each individual to advance His kingdom. Yes, there are standards of holiness and discipleship, but Christ brings our unique differences and molds us into oneness. Our differences are not removed but are blended by the marvelous work of Christ.

## Defending Unity

### *Objective 2:*

*Identify the attacks against unity.*

### The Need to Defend

It is necessary to uphold and defend our God-given unity. In Christ's high-priestly prayer, recorded in John 17, Jesus prays for himself, His disciples, and those who would come to trust in Him as Savior. Thus, He prayed for us—that we would be one as He and the heavenly Father are one. Jesus still petitions the Father to keep us in unity.

### Christians Can Be Their Own Worst Enemies

James writes, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" (James 4:1). Often the impediments to unity are not a result of the world's actions; the impediments are of our own making. Individual opinions and preferences cause us to ignore the divine call to unity. Instead of working together, we work against each other or pull away in isolation. When our flesh takes control, misunderstandings lead to hurt, which later results in bitterness. But discord, dissension, and factions are works of the flesh. Paul writes,

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.  
(Galatians 5:19–21)

If you are practicing any of these behaviors, your life is not pleasing to God. It is time to change!

## Specific Enemies of Unity

Therefore, to promote unity, we need to guard against several vices. In Ephesians 4:31, Paul warns, “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.” Bitter people are resentful, cynical, prone to complain, and quick to attack others. Bitterness affects our speech, thinking, and reactions. It forms a resentful spirit that refuses reconciliation.

Rage is a vehement passion—an emotional attack that seemingly has no reason or direction. Destruction is left in its path. Anger has many manifestations, including a smoldering sense of indignation, personal animosity, inward resentment, feelings of dislike or enmity toward someone, hatred, and a desire for revenge. While rage is an outburst of the moment, anger is a settled disposition. Many people have what some psychologists call “free-floating” anger. Such people are perpetually angry but do not know why. Little irritations can set off rather explosive episodes.

Paul warns against brawling, which is quarreling noisily. Brawlers shout in their attempt to shut down opposing voices. People in the habit of brawling may also turn to violent threats to get their way. They think that their speech and actions will force others to comply with their wishes. Brawlers usually manifest arrogance and are quick to blame others when problems arise. Brawling is a visible expression of immaturity and an unsubmitted heart to God. This ungodly behavior produces strife, pain, and uneasiness among godly people.

Slander is the deliberate and cowardly act of destroying another person’s character and reputation. Slanderers spread false reports, gossip, and belittle others who are often not present to defend themselves. This description resembles that of the devil, who spreads false accusations about God’s people to destroy them, to hinder the work they do, and to impede the advancement of God’s kingdom. When I was a child and someone would say mean things to me, I would remember these

words: “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” The fact is, however, that evil and malicious words do hurt. Destructive words break hearts and undermine unity.

The final enemy of unity that Paul lists is malice, which is wishing evil or harm on another person. The person given over to malice is consumed by the offenses of another. Such a person wants to see his or her enemies suffer pain. How antithetical to Christ's attitude! Though wronged and insulted, Jesus continued to love and bless others. He is our supreme example.

### Disunity Spawned by the Devil

We should not ignore the possibility that some disunity among believers is the work of the devil. Satan is not only not for us, he is vehemently against us. For this reason the apostle Paul commands, “Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:11–12).

Satan is described as the deceiver, tempter, and accuser. He or his demonic agents can sow doubt in believers' minds and cause division in the body of Christ. The enemy will attack the church any way he can. Remember, our battle is not with other people; it is with the enemy of our souls, Satan. He can use individuals, in the moment of their weakness and lust, as pawns for his purpose. Just as the devil entered the heart of Judas to carry out Jesus' betrayal, the devil takes great pleasure in manipulating situations to destroy unity in the church. It is imperative that we stand against him and his schemes.

## Developing Unity

### *Objective 3:*

*Discuss how unity is developed in the believer and the church.*

### Unity Is Not Optional

Paul shares with the Ephesians this challenge: “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1–3). Unity is both a gift and a work of the Holy Spirit and something we develop as vessels yielded to God. We can either destroy unity or enhance it.

Paul speaks of keeping unity as our “calling.” Other translations list this responsibility as our vocation or job. A job conveys the idea of toil and effort, and this is what we are called to do. Getting along with one another can be toilsome as our patience is tested. Yet, we are to spare no effort to keep, develop, and enhance unity. Unity is not optional for the church; it is mandatory!

Perhaps we are too lax in promoting unity. We find it easier to ignore division and differences than to address their destructiveness. Physically, some diseases can spread infection throughout the whole body. If a cancerous tumor is left untreated, it can quickly grow out of control, multiply, and possibly kill the affected person. Disunity in the church does the same thing. It eventually kills people spiritually.

### Principles for Promoting Unity

Here are some foundational principles for promoting and developing unity in the family of God:

1. *Take care of the small stuff.* We tend to overlook and sometimes excuse the behavior and words of someone who displays divisiveness. We may chalk it up to personality or going through difficulty.

Subtle divisive actions and comments may seem insignificant, but a seed of discord might be taking root. Ask God how to handle the situation. The Holy Spirit will give you discernment and wisdom to respond properly. Even within ourselves, we need to weed out the smallest signs of discord. We personally need God to shine His light upon our own hearts.

2. *Realize conflicts will occur in all human relationships.* Being a Christian does not make you immune to conflict. In Acts 15:36–44, a disagreement emerged between Paul and Barnabas. In a previous missionary journey, their companion, John Mark, left the team and returned home. This was apparently a huge disappointment for Paul. As a result, when Paul and Barnabas prepared for the next missionary trip, Paul did not wish to take John Mark along. Barnabas, however, always the encourager, saw potential in their young brother in the Lord. In fact, Barnabas strongly desired to invite Mark to travel and minister with them.

Two spiritual giants, Paul and Barnabas, wound up in conflict. What was their solution? They chose not to embroil themselves or the church in a painful fight. Rather, they decided to engage in different spheres of outreach ministry. Paul partnered with Silas, and Barnabas worked with John Mark. Was this arrangement successful? Absolutely. Both of their ministries were effective and anointed by God. Did Paul ever reconcile with John Mark? Yes. Some years later, Paul called for John Mark to visit him because John Mark was helpful to him in the ministry (2 Timothy 4:11).

3. *Unity is a lifelong challenge.* The story is told of a child expert who wrote a dissertation on the “10 commandments for raising children.” He then had a child and edited the content to “10 rules for raising children.” Following the birth of another

child, he changed the paper to “10 suggestions for raising children.” After his children became teenagers, he finally rewrote his paper, entitling it “10 questions when raising children.” Experience and wisdom gained from having children changed his outlook.

When it comes to building relationships and maintaining unity, you never stop learning. People may always surprise you. They will say and do things that irritate you. They will undermine unity, many times unknowingly. However, God will use every conflict to develop character and depth in our relationships. Do not give up the cause of unity; it is worth defending and developing.

## Displaying Unity

### *Objective 4:*

*Show how humility, gentleness, and love aid in building unity.*

Ephesians 4:2 states, “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.” Here, the apostle Paul mentions a few key ingredients to building unity in the family of God. These ingredients are also necessary for unity in other relationships.

### Humility and Gentleness

Humility is the opposite of pride. The ancient Greeks regarded humility as a flaw, a weakness, and not a virtue. Life was to be lived in fullness, so there was no room for humility. Even today, we are encouraged to demand our rights, flaunt our possessions, be heard, prove our worth, broadcast our achievements, and loudly decry any and all kinds of mistreatment. Following the world’s standards, pride can easily spread its roots deep in our lives.

In contrast, Jesus said that we should learn from Him: “‘Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart’” (Matthew 11:29). The person who is humble does not assert his or her own importance or position. He or she is submissive to those

in authority. In Philippians 2:7–8, Paul writes that our Lord “made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” Unity will not be put into practice until we have displayed the heart of servant, exemplified by Christ.

### Patience and Forgiveness

It is not hard to find people who advocate revenge and stir up hatred. But Colossians 3:12 states, “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” We are imperfect people who live among other imperfect people. Therefore, we must learn to be patient with ourselves and with one another, even as God is patient and forgiving.

### Love

Ephesians 5:1–2 reads, “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Walking in love may leave you feeling vulnerable. In other words, you may wonder if your love for others will be reciprocated or if others will take advantage of you. The reality is that certain individuals will not respond to love, and others may take advantage of you. Still, God calls us to walk in love.

## Discovering Its Potential

### *Objective 5:*

*Describe how unity impacts evangelism.*

Unity is a prerequisite for successful evangelism and missions. Every committed Christian should be passionate about winning souls. Spreading the Good News of Jesus is too big a task for one person, one local

church, one denomination, or one mission agency. Jesus prayed for His church: “Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one” (John 17:11). He added, “I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:22–23).

Ecclesiastes speaks of the power of unity. “If two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:11–12).

### A Lesson from Nature

Effectively sharing the Gospel at home and around the world is rewarding but very taxing. Faithful soul winners and evangelistic churches place themselves in many situations that require support—prayer, encouragement, financial backing, special training, and so on. We will go farther in spreading the Gospel with less stress when each member of the family of God does his or her part and works for the good of the whole.

Consider how geese help each other in their yearly migrations. As they fly together in formation, they create a special pocket of air in which to travel. Canada geese travel far distances in a “V” formation; by doing so they can travel about 70 percent farther than if each bird flew alone. When a goose falls out of formation, it quickly feels the resistance of flying unaccompanied. It then moves back into formation to take advantage of the smoother air. When a goose flying the point position tires, it rotates back into the formation and another goose takes its place in front. The geese also honk to encourage those in front not to slow down too much. When a goose gets sick or is wounded, other geese will drop out of formation and follow it down. They stay with the injured bird until it dies or is able to fly again.

## Conclusion

So, are you promoting unity in your church? The story is told of a visitor to a mental hospital who was amazed that only a few guards were in charge of so many patients, including some who were potentially dangerous. The visitor asked his guide why the hospital administration did not assign more guards. The guide replied, "There is no fear. Lunatics never unite" (Green 1989, 65).

### SUGGESTED SCRIPTURES TO MEMORIZE

Ecclesiastes 4:12

Galatians 5:19–21

Ephesians 4:2

Ephesians 5:1–2

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**SELF-TEST**

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After studying the lesson, please read each study question carefully and circle the correct response. There is only one correct response for each question.

1. *A true statement about unity is that*
  - a) *God molds our uniqueness into oneness.*
  - b) *our unity is uniformity.*
  - c) *in unity, our differences are removed.*
  
2. *The idea of unity originated from*
  - a) *business leaders.*
  - b) *God.*
  - c) *football coaches.*
  
3. *Ecclesiastes 4:12 speaks to the idea of*
  - a) *wisdom versus folly.*
  - b) *youthful arrogance.*
  - c) *strength in numbers.*
  
4. *According to Galatians 5, those who practice the works of the sinful nature*
  - a) *are only human.*
  - b) *will not inherit the kingdom of God.*
  - c) *please God.*
  
5. *Who is the mastermind behind the demise of unity?*
  - a) *The devil*
  - b) *We are the mastermind.*
  - c) *Church leadership*
  
6. *Paul speaks of unity as*
  - a) *an unachievable goal.*
  - b) *a calling.*
  - c) *a piece of cake.*
  
7. *Which is not a foundational principle for developing unity?*
  - a) *Taking care of the big things*
  - b) *Realizing relational conflicts will happen*
  - c) *Embracing unity as a lifelong challenge*
  
8. *The ancient Greeks regarded humility as a*
  - a) *virtue.*
  - b) *strength.*
  - c) *flaw.*

9. *The opposite of pride is*
  - a) *humility.*
  - b) *irritability.*
  - c) *retaliation.*
  
10. *What lessons of unity can we learn from geese?*
  - a) *Stick our heads in the sand, and ignore one another.*
  - b) *Repeat everything we hear, and gossip about one another.*
  - c) *Join the formation and encourage one another.*

## ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

Note: If you answered a study question incorrectly, you can find the objective it was drawn from by looking at the reference in parenthesis.

1. a (10.1)
2. b (10.1)
3. c (10.5)
4. b (10.2)
5. a (10.2)
6. b (10.3)
7. a (10.3)
8. c (10.4)
9. a (10.4)
10. c (10.5)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS LESSON

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