

CAN WE ALL GET ALONG?
BY ANDY MANNING
October 31, 2018

The title of this sermon is “Can we all get Along?”

This is week three of our sermon series on the importance of the church, and today we’re going to talk about **unity** in the church.

Let me explain the title of this sermon series – “I Love Jesus But I Don’t Like Church.”

That is the attitude of too many Christians in America.

Many have stopped going to church altogether; those that attend do so less and less; most that attend don’t get involved or contribute in any significant way; and most young people who are raised in church leave in their twenties and never return.

Most Christians in America think that church involvement is optional. But in this sermon series we’ve learned that it is a command.

Most Christians think that the church is insignificant and unimportant. But we’ve learned in this series that the church is extremely important.

Most Christians think they don’t need the church. But we’ve learned in this series that we do need the church, and the church needs each one of us.

So today we’re going to finish off this series on the church by talking about church **unity**.

The year was 1991, Los Angeles, CA. An black man named Rodney King was speeding down the California 210 Freeway at more than 100 miles per hour with two other passengers when the LAPD started chasing him. He ran a red light, nearly causing an accident, before finally coming to a stop. King later said that he didn’t initially stop because he thought the speeding ticket would be a violation of his parole for second-degree burglary. He

was a convicted thief. King delayed, but finally exited the car. He seemed confused. The police officers ordered him to the ground, and King responded by lying down. Accounts vary about what happened next, but it was determined that a police officer shot King with a Taser gun and then an officer beat him with a nightstick. King then tried to get up, so then two other officers joined in. At this time a neighbor in that area starting filming the whole thing. The video showed King lunging at an officer and then several more beatings on King with nightsticks while King tried to stand up again and again and was beaten again and again. When he was finally subdued, several officers turned him around on the pavement and began to handcuff him. The police chief asked the district attorney to file charges against and prosecute the officers. The following year, in April of 1992, a jury cleared the four police officers of any wrongdoing. Immediately after hearing the verdict, riots, arson, and looting broke out in the streets of LA. That night video cameras captured a scene in which a white truck driver named Reginald Denny was stopped at a red light, dragged out of his truck by a group of black men and beaten senseless. The following day, open gun battles took place on the streets, as well as between looters and shop owners (many Asian) defending their lives and property. The Mayor Bradley declared a state of emergency and imposed a curfew. The governor deployed the National Guard to maintain order. The following day, Rodney King went on TV to try to calm things down. He said, "People, I just want to say, you know, can we all get along? Can we get along? Can we stop making it... horrible for the older people and the kids? It's just not right. It's not right. It's not... going to change anything. We'll get our justice... Please, we can get along here. We all can get along." King's words entered our cultural lexicon as, "Can't we all just get along?" But what he asked was, "Can we all get along?"¹

Rodney King asked that question of the city of Los Angeles.

Today I want to ask that question of the church. Can we all get along at Church Acadiana? Can we achieve and maintain unity in our church?

WHY TALK ABOUT UNITY?

¹ Bill Bennett, *A Century Turns*.

Is unity something we should talk about? Is it something we should be interested in? Yes. For five reasons.

1. Unity is God's will.

Jesus prayed for the church to be unified. **John 17:20-21** “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.”

The apostle Paul prayed for it. **Philippians 1:27** “Just one thing: As citizens of heaven, live your life worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or am absent, I will hear about you that you are standing firm in one spirit, in one accord, contending together for the faith of the gospel.”

We need to talk about unity because it is God's will; it is what God wants; it is important to God.

2. Unity is commanded.

Every Christian is commanded to pursue and protect the unity of the church.

Romans 12:16 says, “Live in harmony with one another.”

Romans 14:19 “So then, let us pursue what promotes peace and what builds up one another.”

1 Corinthians 1:10 says, “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.”

Ephesians 4:3 “making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

Philippians 2:3 “make my joy complete by thinking the same way, having the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.”

1 Timothy 2:8 “Therefore, I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument.”

1 Peter 3:8 “Finally, all of you be like-minded.”

We need to talk about unity because we are commanded to be unified.

Just as a side note. Many Christians believe that church involvement is optional. It's not. Why? Because God commands us to pursue and protect the unity of the church. That command assumes that you are involved in church. How can you pursue and protect the unity of the church if you are not involved in church?

3. Threatening unity is dangerous.

The Bible gives two warnings about those who threaten the unity of the church; two warnings to divisive people.

First, the Bible says to give divisive people two warnings, and then if they refuse to repent, to excommunicate them. Three strikes and you're out. Titus 3:10-11 “10 Reject a divisive person after a first and second warning. 11 For you know that such a person has gone astray and is sinning; he is self-condemned.”

Second, God will punish any person who hurts His church. 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 (TLB) “16 Don't you realize that all of you together are the house of God, and that the Spirit of God lives among you in his house? 17 If anyone defiles and spoils God's home, God will destroy him. For God's home is holy and clean, and you are that home.”

So we definitely need to talk about unity to make sure that we don't come under the disciplinary hand of God.

4. We need to work together to accomplish the Great Commission.

That the Bible places such a strong emphasis on unity implies that we need to work together to accomplish our mission – the Great Commission – reaching the lost and building mature disciples.

God has given us a mission, and each of us is expected to contribute to that mission, but we cannot do it alone. We need each other.

We are better together.

You've probably heard the word "TEAM" used as an acronym: Together Everyone Achieves More. That certainly applies to the church.

One of the differences between lions and tigers is that lions hunt together, but tigers hunt alone. This is why if a lion and a tiger got in a fight, the lion would win every time, because he has all of his friends with him.

When it comes to the Christian life, God wants us to be like lions rather than tigers. He wants us to live on mission together, not off by ourselves. Why? Because we need each other.

Have you ever seen geese fly in a V formation? Do you know why they fly in a V? It actually conserves their energy, allowing them to fly longer distances. Each bird flies slightly above the bird in front of him, resulting in a reduction of wind resistance. The birds take turns being in the front, falling back when they get tired. Scientists have found that birds that fly alone beat their wings more frequently and have higher heart rates than those that fly in formation.

The same is true with us. God wants us to fly in formation; to be a part of the church; because we can accomplish a lot more if we work together than we can if we fly alone.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 “ 9 Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their efforts. 10 For if either falls, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to lift him up. 11 Also, if two lie down together, they can keep warm; but how can one person alone keep warm? 12 And if someone overpowers one person, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not easily broken.”

But here's the problem. If we can't get along, then we can't get things done.

What happens when a football team is not unified? Or a band? Or any group of people? They don't get anything done. We have to be unified so that we can accomplish our mission.

Remember that we are a body. A body has to be unified in order to function properly. The authors of the book *Simple Church* put it this way. "When the body is not united, it is not a pretty picture. Imagine when you tried to walk, if one leg went to the right and the other to the left. Imagine the confusion if your right eye looked up and your left eye looked down. Imagine the discomfort if your right arm refused to partner with your left arm. Imagine the perplexity if your feet decided not to operate with the rest of your body. When a local body of Christ is not united in the same direction, the body is ineffective. When one part of the body refuses to function, there is disarray. When one part of the body wants to be a separate body, there is division. The world watches and is confused."²

5. Achieving unity is not easy.

That the Bible places so much emphasis on pursuing and protecting unity also implies that achieving unity is not easy.

Ephesians 4:3 (EHV) "Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Why are we commanded to make every effort to maintain unity? Because it requires our best effort. Unity isn't easy. It isn't natural.

Think about how different we are. We all have different preferences. Different backgrounds. Different levels of knowledge. Different experiences. Different strengths. Different weaknesses. Different interests. Unity is not going to be natural. It's not going to be easy.

Think about a car. A car doesn't naturally stay on the road, in the correct lane, and obey all of the traffic signals. It has to be led; it has to be constantly monitored; it has to be driven; it has to be managed; it has to be controlled; it has to be intentionally guarded and protected.

² Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church*, p. 183.

The same is true of the church. A church will naturally drift toward disorganization and disunity. That's the way it is with any organization. And so for the church to remain unified, it takes hard work; it takes intentionality.

And that's why we need to talk about the subject of unity.

WHAT IS UNITY?

Now before we get practical and start looking at how to pursue and protect unity, we first need to define unity.

One definition of unity that I have used for years is this: **Unity is getting along and working together to achieve a common goal.**

Think about a basketball team.

For a basketball team to be unified, they first need to get along. They need to avoid conflict, and fighting, and arguing, and hating each other.

But that's not enough to be unified. Getting along is only one aspect of unity. For the team to win, it's not enough that they avoid fighting and arguing. They also need to work together to achieve a common goal – that of winning. They need to agree to set aside their differences, and set aside their selfish desires, and each do whatever they can to help the team win.

The same is true for the church.

On the one hand, unity means the absence of conflict. It means the absence of fighting and arguing and bitterness and hatred. It means getting along. More than that, it means loving and serving each other.

But getting along is not everything; that's only one side of unity. Unity also involves working together on a common goal – the mission of the church – the Great Commission. We each have to agree to set aside our differences, our preferences, our selfish desires, and do whatever we can to help the church succeed.

Philippians 1:27 “Just one thing: As citizens of heaven, live your life worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or am absent, I will hear about you that you are standing firm in one spirit, in one accord, contending together for the faith of the gospel,”

Paul wrote the letter of Philippians. He hoped that the church in Philippi would be unified. And that meant three things: Standing firm in one spirit, in one accord, contending together for the faith of the gospel. There’s a biblical definition of unity.

First, unity means standing firm in one spirit. That means that we have the same goal, purpose or mission. For our church to be unified, we need to agree on the same mission. What is our mission? The Great Commission. To win the lost and help them grow to maturity.

Second, unity means contending together for the faith of the gospel. Not only must we have the same goal, but we need to work together.

To contend together is an athletic term in Greek, *synathleo*. It means to wrestle in company with; to seek jointly; to strive together for; to strive together as a team; to struggle with someone in an athletic contest.

It’s not enough that we have the same goal. FedEx and UPS have the same goal, but they are not unified. They are in fierce competition. Walmart and Amazon have the same goal, but they are not unified.

We need to have the same goal in the church, but we also must contend together. All hands on deck. Everyone in the church needs to get involved and do whatever they can to contribute to the cause.

Third, unity means being in one accord.

This doesn’t mean that the entire church needs to try to fit inside of a Honda. Just kidding.

One translation says “Contending together as one.”

Another says, “Contending together as one man.”

Not only must we work together, but we must work together as one.

In other words, to achieve unity, we must seek the highest level of order and organization. We must strive for efficiency and excellence.

Now let’s talk about how to pursue and protect unity.

1. Avoid pride.

Pride may be the biggest unity killer of all.

Proverbs 13:10 “Arrogance leads to nothing but strife, but wisdom is gained by those who take advice.” Where there is arrogance, there is strife.

How does pride kill unity?

First, pride refuses to follow the leader.

The Bible says that church members need to submit to church leadership.

Hebrews 13:17 “Obey your leaders and submit to them, since they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account, so that they can do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.”

This doesn’t meant that your pastor has the authority over every area of your life; it’s just talking about church business.

And it doesn’t mean that you have to do whatever your pastor tells you to do. You certainly don’t violate Biblical doctrine or morality just because your pastor told you to. But when it comes to matters of church business, of programming, strategy, methodology, you are commanded to follow the leaders.

But pride refuses to do that. Pride demands that the leader follow him. Pride demands its own way. “We either do things my way, we either go with my idea, or I’m out.”

Second, pride doesn’t apologize or admit fault.

When someone tells a prideful person that they did something to hurt their feelings, the prideful person refuses to apologize; they refuse to admit fault.

And they refuse to change. They are too holy, and too important to change for anyone. Everyone else needs to adjust to them.

Third, pride judges others.

They assume they know people’s motives. So when someone offends them, they assume that the person offended them on purpose.

Pride assumes everyone should have the same convictions as theirs, and so they condemn people on matters that God has not spoken. So if they think it is a sin to play the lottery, or dance, or play cards, or watch R-rated movies, or go trick-or-treating, or drink alcohol, they assume it is a sin for everyone, and they condemn the people who don’t have the same convictions.

Pride assumes that everyone is called to the same ministry. If they feel called to serve in the nursery, they believe everyone should feel called, and they condemn those in the church don’t. If they feel called to volunteer for the Jeep Jaunt, they assume everyone should volunteer, and they condemn those who don’t.

One weekend I volunteered to go to the prison in Angola to minister to the inmates. There were several men there from First Baptist Church of Lafayette, and as I was talking to one of them, he gave himself a good pat on the back. He talked about how important prison ministry is, and how good it is that we were there doing ministry. But then he got critical. He said, “But where’s our pastor?”

Why isn't Pastor Steve here?" He thought that because he was called to prison ministry, that every Christian should volunteer for prison ministry. But Pastor Steve has his own ministry. There are literally thousands of ways that each of us could volunteer and serve the Lord every single day. There's no way that we can do all of them. And we don't have to. God calls each of us to serve Him in different ways. But pride doesn't see that.

I could go on and on about how pride kills unity.

That's why to achieve unity we must each pursue the virtue of humility.

Philippians 2:3 "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves."

The definition of pride is thinking too highly of yourself. The definition of humility is seeing yourself correctly – the way God sees you. It is seeing yourself through the lens of scripture. What does Scripture say about you?

- You are priceless, but without God you are hopeless.
- You are important, but no more important than anyone else.
- You are very talented, but your talents are a gift from God, and He gave them to you for serving Him and others.
- You have many strengths, but you are very weak without a devoted relationship with God, and without a close connection to church family.
- You have an amazing mind, but you are foolish without the wisdom of God's word.
- You may be in charge at home or at work, but God wants you to submit to His authority.
- You may be a leader, but God put you in charge to serve those you lead.
- You can accomplish much, but apart from Christ you can do nothing.
- You may be very beautiful, or very strong, but true beauty and strength are measured by a person's character.
- You may be very rich, but God wants you to be rich in good deeds.
- You may be rich in good deeds, but apart from God's grace through the cross of Christ, you deserve eternal hell.

2. Be slow to anger.

Proverbs 15:18 “A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict, but one slow to anger calms strife.”

Proverbs 29:22 “An angry person stirs up conflict, and a hot-tempered one increases rebellion.”

A hot-tempered person kills unity. How so?

First, they are easily offended, and offense puts “a fence” between people.

They are very sensitive. They get angry over anything and everything.

They get angry when the church leaders make a change that they don't like. They get angry when someone in the church lets them down, or offends them, or when they aren't treated perfectly. They get angry when they don't get their way. They get angry when someone in the church sins. They get angry if the church service goes too long. They get angry if the service is too short. They get angry if the music is too loud; they angry when it is not loud enough.

In other words, hot-tempered people only have one emotion – anger. Anger dominates and overpowers all other emotions.

They don't just feel disapproval, or disappointment, or bothered, hurt; they let all of those negative emotions turn to anger.

This causes them to do divisive things, because when you lose your temper, you actually experience temporary insanity.

They might raise their voice at someone and yell. This always pushes people away and divides friends.

They might say mean things to someone. “You idiot. You jerk. You fool.” Or worse.

They might do mean things. They might hit someone. They might destroy property. They might leave the church. They might drop out of a ministry team.

Instead of being hot-tempered we need to be **patient** – **slow to anger**.

The Greek word for patience is *makrothymeo*. It is a combination of two words. *Macros* means long, in terms of time. And *thymos* means temper, or anger. So it means to have a long fuse.

How can you develop a long fuse?

First of all, lower your expectations of the church.

Don't expect church members or church leaders to be perfect. Don't expect the church to always stay the same. Don't expect to always get your way. Don't expect to always be treated perfectly. Don't expect to never have conflict. Conflict in the church inevitable, if you stick around long enough, and get involved enough.

If you leave the church every time you have conflict, then you'll never grow, and you'll keep running, because you'll experience conflict at every church.

A second way to grow in patience and develop a long fuse is to give people permission to be imperfect.

I'm not saying that the church needs to allow its members to live in gross immorality and outright rebellion to God's word. Of course not.

But I'm talking those normal sins that we all commit from time to time, like when someone raises their voice at you, or says something mean to you, or doesn't call you back or return your email or text message, or when someone is late for a meeting, or when someone doesn't show up at all, or when someone forgets about your birthday, or when someone wears something that offends you. These are sins, mistakes that we all make from time to time.

And if we are going to stay unified, we have to give each other permission to be imperfect.

The Bible calls this “bearing with one another.” **Ephesians 4:2** “With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.” We need to bear with one another. We need to put up with one another.

This is also called tolerance.

We need to overlook differences and offenses in order to stay unified.

We are not going to agree about everything. And we are going to offend one another from time to time. We have to tolerate each other.

Third, forgive.

Ultimately, to grow a long fuse, you need to develop the virtue of forgiveness.

Ephesians 4:31 “Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice. 32 And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.”

To forgive is show love to those who offend you.

We’re going to step on each other’s toes from time to time. We’re going to rub each other the wrong way from time to time.

To stay unified, we need to forgive each other. We need to show love to each other, even when we don’t like each other, and even when we are offended by each other.

James 1:19 “My dear brothers and sisters, understand this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.”

3. Avoid gossip.

Gossip is another unity killer.

Proverbs 16:28 “A contrary person spreads conflict, and a gossip separates close friends.”

Proverbs 26:20 “Without wood, fire goes out; without a gossip, conflict dies down.”

Unfortunately most people don't even know what gossip is.

Gossip is not telling lies about people. That's slander.

Gossip is speaking negatively about someone behind their back.

Anytime you speak negatively about someone behind their back, in their absence, you are engaging in gossip.

It's a sin, and it kills the unity of the church.

Sometimes people say, “I would say it to their face if they were here.” Maybe so, but they're not here, so don't say it.

Sometimes people say, “I had to talk about that person because I needed advice.” Or, “I had to tell so and so about the situation because I wanted them to join me in prayer about the situation.” Lame. Just don't do it. Don't talk about others behind their back.

So what do you do if someone in the church offends you? What if you have beef with someone in the church? It's simple.

Go to the offender in person, in private.

First, go to the offender. If someone offends you, that's the only person you should talk to about the offense. It's no one else's business. The only time you bring others into it is if the offender refuses to meet with you, or refuses to repent.

Second, go in person. Not the phone. Not email. Not a text. In person. We are much nicer in person.

Third, go in private. Again, it's just between you and the offender. Don't bring your friends. Don't confront the person in public. Don't confront them on your Facebook page.

The **authors** of the book *Boundaries* call gossip “triangulation”. “Triangulation is the failure to resolve a conflict between two persons and the pulling in of a third to take sides. This is a boundary problem because the third person has no business in the conflict, and but is used for comfort and validation by the ones who are afraid to confront each other. This is how conflicts persist, people don't change, and enemies are made unnecessarily.”³

The best way to put it is to **be a raving fan in public, and an honest critic in private**. That's how we should talk about one another in the church. If you are talking about someone, be a raving fan. Only say good things. And if you have beef with them, then you can speak honestly and frankly with them in private.

4. Don't be quarrelsome.

Quarreling divides a church as much as anything else.

Proverbs 26:21 “As charcoal for embers and wood for fire, so is a quarrelsome person for kindling strife.”

Proverbs 20:3 “Honor belongs to the person who ends a dispute, but any fool can get himself into a quarrel.”

What is a quarrel?

A quarrel is not a disagreement. It's impossible to agree on everything. It's okay to have disagreements in the church.

A quarrel is not a discussion.

³ Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Boundaries*, p. 134.

A discussion is simply a conversation about our disagreement. It is each side sharing their viewpoint, and listening to the viewpoint of the other side. Discussions are good and beneficial.

A quarrel is a fight. It is an argument.

What's the difference between an argument and a discussion? In an argument tempers flare, insults fly, voices raise, people stop listening to each other, they start talking faster, and they start talking over each other. Your blood starts boiling. You might start shaking. Your face might turn red. You may start saying mean and sarcastic things to each other. Quarrels divide.

How can we avoid quarrels in the church?

First, don't be afraid of disagreement?

Some people feel threatened and offended when people disagree with them. Don't.

That's pride. Pride demands that everyone agree with them. Pride assumes that they are always right.

Allow others to have a different opinion than you.

Second, agree to disagree.

We don't have to agree on everything in the church to be unified.

When should you not agree to disagree? In matters of doctrine and morality. Other than that, it's okay to disagree.

The Bible gives us a lot of freedom. It doesn't tell us exactly how to do everything in the church. It tells us what to do, but not how to do it.

The Bible doesn't say what time we should have services, or what style of music to play, or how loud the music should be, or how long the service should be. The Bible doesn't say how many services we should have each week; it doesn't say what age the nursery should go up to; it doesn't tell us what toys to put in the nursery; or how to set up the nursery. The Bible doesn't say how a church building should be designed; whether or not it should have a steeple; it doesn't say what Bible translation we should use; it doesn't say whether we should have Vacation Bible School, or a youth group, or a children's ministry. It doesn't say how much the church should pay the pastor, and how much the church should spend on a building, how much the church should spend on marketing and outreach, or how much the church should give to world missions. I could go on and on.

The Bible is silent on a host of matters.

When it comes to morality and doctrine, we can't agree to disagree.

But when it comes to matters of style, and methodology, and programming, or anything that the Bible is silent about, we can agree to disagree.

In other words, we can let issues of morality and doctrine divide us; but we must not divide over issues of style and methodology.

The authors of *Simple Church* put it this way.

More often in churches, the differences that lead to division are not theological or biblical. The differences that harm most churches are in the realm of ministry approach or philosophy. People will often agree theologically but disagree about ministry philosophy. People will often nod their heads in agreement about a biblical issue but be diametrically opposed over a specific approach to ministry. You've heard, "Why are we doing it this way?" "Why are we not doing this anymore?" These are not theological issues; these are debates over preference, style, and approach."⁴

⁴ *Simple Church*, p 185.

Third, to avoid quarreling, be careful about discussing differences.

We are going to have differences of opinion all the time. And that's okay.
And at times it can be helpful to discuss those disagreements.

But we have to be careful. Arguments always start out as innocent discussions. Then they escalate.

So sometimes, even though you disagree, it may be best just not to bring it up. You don't have to make it known every time you disagree with someone.
That's just weird.

As well, when you do verbalize your disagreement, be careful about how far you take the discussion. Don't let it escalate.

5. Put on love.

Finally, to protect the unity of the church, we simply need to continue to cultivate the virtue of love.

Colossians 3:14 "Above all, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity."

The most important factor in pursuing and protecting unity is the virtue of love.

Each of us needs to work on cultivating the virtue of love in our personal lives.

Remember what love is. **Love means doing what is best for someone, not what makes them feel good. It means meeting people's needs, not their wants.**

The Bible tells us how to love one another. How do you know the loving thing to do in each and every situation?

Matthew 22:39 "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Another way to put it is **Luke 6:31** "Just as you want others to do for you, do the same for them."

Treat people the way you want to be treated. It's the Golden Rule.

When it comes to your church family, in everything you say and do, treat church members the way you want to be treated. If we can just do that, we can stay unified.

CONCLUSION

Mark Twain used to say he put a dog and cat in a cage together as an experiment, to see if they could get along. They did, so he put in a bird, a pig, and a goat. They, too, got along fine after a few adjustments. Then he put in a Baptist, Presbyterian, and Catholic; soon there was not a living thing left.

Unfortunately Christians have not always done a good job in the area of unity.

Many people refuse to go back to church because they witnessed or were the victims of church conflict.

Many churches are stuck, unable to grow, unable to make any progress with the Great Commission because they can't get along.

At Church Acadiana let's be different. Let's be a unified church.

Let's get along, and let's work together to accomplish God's goals for our church.