

All one in Christ

A question that makes sense

Unity is a fascinating topic. Some 44 years ago, I was asked a question which hit me hard. Is God pleased with all the divisions there are in the religious world? I was just a kid. I had never given that question any thought. But when it was asked of me, it made a lot of sense. Truly, Jesus did not want his disciples to split into thousands of sectarian groups. The divisions exhibited in modern Christianity are actually shameful to the gospel of peace and reconciliation proclaimed by Jesus and his apostles. I was eager to understand the concept of unity in the New Testament. Soon after I was baptized, I began to preach and teach in a small church in a little town of Colombia, my country of origin. Rapidly, I began to realize that unity is much more than asking a question with a lot of sense. The seeds of division, segregation, and hatred seem to be deeply ingrained in the human heart. In our small newly founded church, I often felt the tension of social class conflict.

Our Restoration Movement

In 1975 I came to the United States to study the Bible at Sunset School of Preaching. I was gladly impressed with the love and unity I observed in various congregations in Lubbock and surrounding areas. However, at the same time, I was disappointed at the rivalry and separation which were obvious among many congregations. As I continued to study and minister in Lubbock and other adjacent towns, I became aware of the multiple divisions our restoration movement has endured.

What happened to our desire to be a body of unified believers? What happened with our plea for unity? It was appealing and powerful when the pioneers of our movement presented it. It was appealing and powerful back in the 50s and 60s. We are now in the 21st century. Can we still make the same plea? Is it as strong and appealing as it has been in the past? It appears that some churches are not even using it anymore. Many others are simply copying the denominational call for ecumenism.

A Relevant and Powerful Plea

I am here to tell you that the call for unity is a biblical call. It is relevant and powerful. The religious world of modern Christianity continues to reflect sinful division, pride, and segregation of some Christians against others. The state of affairs of sectarian Christianity obscures the magnificence of God and his redemptive plan. Talking about unity and calling believers to be unified in Christ are as important today as they were in the first century, or the 19th century, or the mid-20th century. But there is a big difference! That plea for unity in the 21st century cannot consist of just words and arguments. It has to be a humble demonstration of repentance and loving dedication to Christ.

This is why I am very excited to be part of this great unity event. I applaud you, brothers and sisters, for doing this. Churches everywhere in the world need to be doing this. I want us in the Dallas Ft. Worth area to do it. Please pray for that to happen! I want to thank the organizers for allowing me to speak to you today. I feel very honored and humbled. I think that inviting an

unknown guy whose last name is *Roncancio* is a demonstration of love and genuine desire for unity. Thank you very much.

A Classical Affirmation of Unity

The text you chose is fantastic! I enjoyed reflecting on it. It goes to the heart of unity.

Galatians 3:26-28

For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

Christ is the absolute center of all. As many believers as have been baptized into Christ are **all** one in Christ Jesus. After a deep discussion which had to do with the segregation of Gentile Christians by their fellow Jewish believers, Paul reminds them that **Christ Jesus is the only basis for their salvation and their unity.**

Two Main Issues

The controversy back then involved two main issues: **first**, Jewish believers had the advantage of knowing the Scriptures better and for a longer time than their fellow Gentile Christians. They thought they had a more correct faith, so to speak. **Second**, Jewish believers also felt that they had a better sense of morality than the rest of the world. Gentiles practiced all kinds of abominations and their culture was absolutely corrupted. The way Paul deals with these issues is very enlightening and has significant implications for our Church in the 21st century. His thoughts are what I want to bring to your consideration today as we ask ourselves what it means for Christians *in our times* to be One in Christ.

All Are Equally Sinners

A very central teaching in the letters of the apostle Paul is the belief that "*no man is justified by the law in the sight of God*" (3:11). This statement is very profound and has far reaching implications for us. It means that when it comes to our relationship with God and our salvation in him, every single human being is equally and totally separated from God. God is absolutely holy and righteous, and none of us can claim any sort of personal merit to stand approved before God.

This teaching did not really originate with Paul. Jesus himself had said, "*None is good, save one, that is, God*" (Luke 18:19). This statement is remarkable in the context of the story of the rich ruler who came to Jesus saying, "*Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? none is good, save one, that is, God*" (18:19).

Why did Jesus say this? Why did he question the rich ruler addressing him as "good master?" It is not that Jesus did not consider himself to be just as good as God. The problem is that this poor individual is coming to him searching for eternal life with a tremendously wrong assumption. He has some curiosity. Perhaps he even feels some kind of emptiness. Maybe he knows he is lacking something. But he has a serious misconception about what goodness is.

When we see goodness from a comparative point of view, we can observe various degrees of morality. Some people are better than others. There is altruism - there is kindness - there is moral integrity in human beings. However, when we come to the biblical assessment of human righteousness, we have a completely different picture. What happens is that we are surrounded by darkness and are accustomed to it. To us - human beings who live in darkness, any gesture of kindness shines brightly; any correct behavior seems great. It is like when we are in a completely dark room and someone lights a match. We immediately notice it. However, if the full light of the sun is shining on us, the poor light of a match is hardly noticeable. This is what happens with human righteousness. As soon as we bring it close to God, it appears as nothing.

The rich ruler in our story came to Jesus with a poor view of goodness. He saw Jesus just as another human being doing nice things. He failed to see the goodness of God in him. Why? Because he was too impressed with his own righteousness. When Jesus talked to him about the Commandments, he was pleased and proud to say, *"All these have I kept from my youth up."* Jesus then confronted him with the darkness of his heart. Luke says, *"Now when Jesus heard these things, he said unto him, Yet lackest thou one thing: sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me" (18:21-22).*

The poor guy could not do that. Deep inside he was an idolater. He worshiped wealth. In order to have eternal life, he needed to repent. And in order to repent, he had to be able to see himself in the light of God's holiness. There is no salvation without repentance because true repentance leads us to realize how dependent we are on the grace of God.

Implications

This is exactly what Paul says in **Galatians 3**. All Christians need to understand that we are saved equally and solely through Christ Jesus. But this means that we all have to come to grips with our own wretchedness. This is the beginning of true Christian unity. There are no superior races. There are no better cultures. There are no God-favored nations. There are only pitiful human beings who need Jesus Christ. There is no pointing the finger at anybody. There is no judging. There is no place for thinking, "I am better than you are." There is no "we and those other weird people." There is only "we worthless people in desperate need of grace and forgiveness." Please do not take me wrong! I am not here to tell you that you are worthless. That is for you to assess in the presence of God. I am here to tell you that I am worthless and that the best day in my life is that day I became aware of that reality, because that day I knew how much God loved me.

A New Plea for the 21st Century

The plea for unity is powerful and relevant in the 21st century. However, we cannot approach the world around us as the ones who have all the answers and practice perfectly the will of God as it is laid out in the New Testament. We have to continue calling believers to be one in Christ. We need to continue inviting people to go back to the New Testament faith as the only basis for true unity. We cannot adopt ecumenism as a substitution for Christian unity. But we need to speak with confession, not with argumentation.

Division among Christians **is a sin**, and we are guilty. It is not that we are right and they are wrong. We are guilty because for the last 200 years we have failed to maintain the unity of the Spirit. And it is not because those corrupted, evil-minded people do not want to do the Will of God as we understand it. It is because we like to feel that we are better than others. We hate, and we like to fight, even if our fights are ludicrous and insignificant. It is because of our *"lusts that war in our members"* (**James 4:1**). Additionally, we have failed as heirs of the New Testament faith to overcome the sinful racial ruptures of our cultural backgrounds. It is not because of language, cultural styles, or innocent comfort zones. It is because we hate those who are different from us; we don't trust them, and we resent their company. We are not ready to kill them, maybe. We try to be polite, but we have failed to love our brothers and sisters who are different from us. The apostle John said, *"He that loveth his brother abideth in the light... But he that hateth his brother is in darkness"* (**1 John 2:10-11**). There is no middle ground. There is no politeness or political correctness. You either love or hate. You either embrace the life of your brother who is different from you, or in the depths of your heart you cherish the idea of eliminating him from the face of the earth.

We need to talk about unity by confessing our own hatred and division. The people of the 21st century do not want to hear our theological arguments about unity. They won't pay any attention because arguments and formulas have failed to become reality. What these people need is to see how we honestly and humbly accept our sins and repent. They need to see how we bring our evil hearts to God in shameful recognition of our incapacity to love, trusting that by his grace, he will transform us. The 21st century world has no place for arrogant churches. If we want to minister, we need to be ready to put on the humble attitude of Jesus. Even though he had no sin, he took a body of sin as he entered our sinful world to save us. We are sinners. We cannot come to the world as innocent people telling others how they should behave. Our mission is to point to the One who saved us from our horrible wretchedness.

When we become Christians and members of the church, it does not mean that we are any better than any other people. It does not mean that we have earned any special privileges. We did not earn anything when we were baptized. We are not earning heaven by being faithful members of the church. We are here because God is gracious. We do not deserve to be here. We do not deserve to be called children of God. Those are blessings that God has freely given us. Even more, no human being deserves to be on earth. When Adam and Eve sinned, they deserved to die, and that's it. They and their children lived because Jesus died on the cross. There are seven billion people on earth today, because Jesus died on the cross! The church in the 21st century needs to understand and accept this truth. We need it ingrained in our hearts if we are going to be taken seriously by the post-Christian world. As we confess our own divisions and our morbid desire to be better than others - even to be *gods* to others and to ourselves and we truly repent, the world will start listening to what we have to say about unity. Otherwise, our discourses will be just empty words.

True Faith that Leads to Salvation

There is another fundamental truth I want to discuss with you today. It is just a continuation and a logical consequence of seriously realizing two things. We all are sinners and our sins look really bad in the presence of God's holiness. If we really are so separated from God by our sinful lives, then how can we possibly be saved? How can we have peace with God? How can we have a permanent relationship with him? How can we escape from his righteous wrath? Paul again gives us a clear and specific answer. He says, *"Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of*

the law, being made a curse for us" (Galatians 3:13). There is no other way. We all have to come to God through the same path, Christ Jesus. He himself saved us by being made a curse for us and taking upon himself all the responsibility for our sin. Our faith then needs to be focused on Christ.

Our text (3:26-27) insists that we *"are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus."* We have **all** been baptized into Christ. We have **all** put on Christ. Therefore we are **all** one in Christ Jesus. Jesus must be the **absolute focus** of our faith. If we **all** look at Jesus, if we **all** follow Jesus, if we **all** love Jesus, then we will **all** be one in Jesus. If we set our eyes on anything else other than Jesus, if we pursue anything else other than Jesus, if we put our faith in anyone or anything other than Jesus, then we will never be united. Faith in Jesus brings unity; anything else brings strife, competition, isolation, segregation, indifference, and splitting. However, if we are not careful, our faith can be distorted, that is we can place the focus of our faith in something other than Jesus. I want to tell you that there are three possible points on which Christians can set our focus; and where we do it is of great importance for maintaining the unity of the Spirit. It is simple. We can focus on ourselves, we can focus on the Bible and the church, or we can focus on Jesus.

Distortions of the Faith

What happens when we focus our attention on ourselves? We feel that we are in control of our spiritual life. We get to choose. Being Christians is a choice we make to better ourselves. "I choose my faith and I choose the church I want to belong to." Why are you a Christian? Because I want to be saved. Why do you go to church? Because I want to grow spiritually. Why did you believe in God? Because I feel good about it. Why do you call yourself a Christian? Because I have a personal relationship with Jesus. Why are you a member of a particular church? Because I am looking for what is best for me and for my family and I like this church. Do you share your faith with others? Well, maybe I invite others to come with me to my church.

Did you notice that everything in the previous interaction was about *me*? Such faith is simply a religious expression of the individualism which characterizes our culture. Do not misunderstand me. I am not against the rights and the freedom of the individual. Individualism has been a fundamental factor contributing to the progress of modern Western societies. God made us individuals, and we do well in recognizing our individuality. However, one thing is acknowledging, respecting, and even promoting our individuality; a completely different thing is to be selfish individuals. We are individuals, but we all exist in God. Without God we are nothing. Selfish individuals define their individuality independently from God. Their egos, their preferences, their choices, and their goals become the center and the focus of their lives.

Notice that we are not saying that unity is not possible for selfish individuals. What we maintain is that godly unity is not compatible at all with selfish individualism. Selfish individuals are capable of great levels of organization and cooperation to accomplish their selfish goals. Noah's descendants wanted to oppose God's plan by refusing to populate the earth. They organize themselves and committed to be unified by building *"a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven"* (Genesis 11:4). We know the end of the story. God had to actually come down and *"confound their language"* to break their rebellious union. We do not want this kind of unity. We want God-pleasing unity. We want unity that honors God. Human beings independent from God are incapable of this type of unity. Therefore, we need to be ready to publicly confess our own selfish individualism and to repent from it. We have to publicly acknowledge that we

have embraced religion for the sake of our own selfish preferences and expectations but that we are bringing our lives to God so that He can transform us from our selfishness into a life of genuine fellowship with Him and others.

Focusing on the Bible and the Church

Another distortion of faith may come from a wrong focus on the Bible and the church. What does that mean? How can that happen? We hear some people complaining that maybe we have focused too much on the Bible or the church. But the Bible is the Word of God. We really have no other way of knowing that will of God. Only by reading the Bible can we know what God's plans are and what he wants from us. Additionally, when we read the Bible, we find out that the church is at the center of God's plans. He planned it before the foundation of the world. How can we possibly have a wrong perspective if we focus on the Bible and the church?

Let us see how this can be possible. My inner thoughts can go something like this. I'm saved because I have the correct doctrine. I belong to the true church. I am better than others who call themselves Christians. People who do not believe like I do are going to hell. I have to convince others that what I believe is the truth, so they can go to heaven, if they are willing to believe what I can teach them.

What is the problem with all these statements? They are of the same nature as the ones before. They all start with the wrong person - salvation originates with me - what I have discovered and what I have done. In reality, this is simply another form of selfish individualism. It reflects pride and confidence in oneself. It is true that right doctrine is important, but I cannot put my faith in my ability to discern it. Learning about the church that God wants is important. But I cannot base my faith on my hermeneutical skills to discover the New Testament pattern for the church. It is not my intelligence that makes salvation possible. My salvation is not the result of my accurate and extensive knowledge. Focusing on what I know, my skills, and my logic is nothing else than feeding my ego, and we can easily fall into this trap, being children of modern Western culture. An additional serious problem with this kind of thinking in the 21st-century is that people have learned to feed their egos with many things other than theological arguments. There is no longer satisfaction or prestige in knowing religion. Therefore, we need to learn to focus on Jesus, the true and only savior. We have to confess that we have been proud and self-sufficient, imagining that our exclusive Bible knowledge grants us salvation and sets us apart from the rest of humanity. Our preaching should not come from the certainty of our knowledge, but from our deep experience of forgiveness and redemption in Jesus Christ.

Faith Focused on Jesus

We need to set the eyes of our hearts on Jesus. He is Lord. He is the exact image of God, **Colossians 1:15**. He is above everything in existence, **Ephesians 1:21**. He is the head of the church, **Ephesians 1:21**. He saved us with his blood, **1 Corinthians 1:10-13**. These texts are particularly important to us, because Paul stresses the exclusive role of Jesus as our savior in order to correct the divisive trends in the church of Corinth. If the Corinthians could focus on Jesus, they would be united. The same is true for us today. Additionally, Jesus is the one resurrected, **1 Timothy 1:10**. He is the powerful creative Word of God, **John 1:1**; He can really create me anew, so that I can become one in him with other believers. Finally, He will come again to judge the world, **2 Thessalonians 1:7-8**.

This last verse is also very important in the 21st-century, and it connects what we have been saying about our need to focus on Jesus with the fundamental belief that *"no man is justified by the law in the sight of God."*

We often hear modern religious preachers saying that God likes everyone, that he doesn't judge or punish anyone, that he is not a God of anger, but a God of love. However, the reality is that the whole world is under the wrath of God. The whole earth is under his curse. *"Death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned," Romans 5:12.* If you think you deserve to be forgiven and brought into a relationship with God, then explain to me why you get sick and why you are going to die! Moreover, explain to me why Jesus died a horrible death on the cross. Do not be afraid of speaking about the wrath of God. When we put our eyes on Jesus, we see the full extend of the wrath of God, but we also see salvation in all its magnificence. Because of our rebelliousness, the whole earth is destined to decay, anguish, and fatal of destruction. The only thing that we deserve is *"judgment and fiery indignation," Hebrews 10:27.* But God made salvation possible through his son Christ Jesus and his cruel death.

Our Only Hope

He is our only hope! Nothing we can do can save us from the wrath of God. Our scientific knowledge, our technological progress, our powerful economy, everything we do, have, or know avails nothing in the face of the wrath of God. We can only be saved in Christ Jesus. There is no one else, and there's no other way. This is our message to the people of the 21st century, *"to them that perish foolishness", 1 Corinthians 1:18.*

This is the only thing of value we have to offer our generation. Churches are worthless unless we proclaim this message. If we don't say and incarnate this truth, we are like salt which *"have lost his savour" Matthew 5:13.* No message can replace this one as the center of our faith. No doctrine can take the place of a simple total trust in Jesus.

The more we trust Jesus, the more we know and adore him and the bigger he is in our hearts, the smaller are the barriers that separate us. Our unity becomes a reflection of the saving message of the cross. It is a living testimony to the truth revealed in the crucified Christ. When we can embrace our brothers and sisters only because they are in Christ, we become unique churches empowered by an indisputable truth and the passionate love of our Lord. If we become proud and arrogant, if we forget that we are sinners just like the rest of the world, if we allow the individualistic selfishness predominant in our culture to permeate our churches, we will become utterly obsolete and useless. If we cannot focus our faith 100% on the resurrected Christ, then our preaching and our faith are vain, and *"we are of all men most miserable," 1 Corinthians 15:14-19.* A church without Jesus is the most pathetic human endeavor.

A church without Jesus cannot maintain its unity. It cannot overcome the evil of its surrounding culture. It cannot put a stop to segregation and discrimination. It cannot conquer hatred and suspicion. It will always fail at the most important of all the commandments. It will be incapable of love. It may fake love. It may talk about it, but the true love of God will always be alien to it. The plea, brothers and sisters, is that we all humbly come to Jesus, acknowledging and confessing our sins, trusting and worshiping him, filling our hearts with his glory, putting aside our selfishness, and become one in Christ, so that the world may know HIM!