

Church Unity: Its Ground and Its Nature, p.4

By Jeff Noblit

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: Ephesians 4:5-6
Preached on: Sunday, October 15, 2017

Anchored in Truth Ministries

1915 Avalon Ave.
Muscle Shoals, AL 35661

Website: www.anchoredintruth.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/anchoredintruth

Grab your Bibles and go to the book of Ephesians. We've been in Ephesians on Sunday night and since I finished the book of Amos, I'm going to maybe stay there a week or two or three on Sunday morning, especially as we are finishing up this treatise on unity in the local church. And I have to be honest, this has kind of shaken me a little bit, kind of stirred me afresh about God's strong centrality and focusing his work and his purposes in his local churches. Now, you might say, "Pastor, there ain't nobody stronger than you on the local church. You remind us all the time." Yeah, and I'm going to keep on because there is one stronger than me, that's God. He sent his Son to die for his church. He is all about his church. His work, his glory, his purpose center in his church. So it's been a good refreshing and stirring to my own soul to look at this afresh and anew.

Let's look at it there in Ephesians 4:1-6. Actually, I believe the unity theme continues down in verse 8 or so, but for now we are going 1 through 6. Most of this is review but we'll pickup with new stuff in just a moment.

1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, 3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon said this, "Fighting sheep are strange animals." When is the last time you saw a video on National Geographic of two sheep fighting it out? You don't even think that way, do you? Then he continued and Spurgeon said, "and fighting Christians are self-evident contradictions." And that's really what the Apostle Paul is saying here. We are so one the way God is doing this work, and by the way, it's God's work; we are not building his church for him, he is building his church and we are cooperating with him. The way God builds his local churches is a powerful picture of unity.

I want you to turn over to Acts, would you do that? Acts 20. You may remember the context. Paul is traveling to Jerusalem. He hopes to get there by Pentecost and he's about

40 miles away from Ephesus at this point and he sends for the elders of the church in Ephesus to come the 40 miles to Miletus because he has some exhortations for them and these are really his parting words. He knows that his death will be soon, he strongly senses that, anyway, and he wants these elders of the church at Ephesus which, of course, is the book we are reading and studying through, Ephesus, he wants to exhort them on some very important things because this is the last time he believes he will ever see them.

So let me just do a running commentary in Acts 20, beginning in verse 17. "From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church." Now mind you, this is a 40 mile journey. That wasn't an easy trip but Paul thought, "This is too important to pass up. I'm close enough that those guys are going to have to come over here. I've got to talk to them."

Verse 18, "And when they had come to him, he said to them, 'You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews.'" Now let's stop right there. Through verse 19 he says, "You know when I came to you I was under lots of burden and lots of trials and difficulties, primarily the difficulties brought upon me by the religious authorities and the religious establishment of the day. The Jews hated my ministry and hated my message." Now, there were some Jews becoming open to Christ being the Savior but only for Jews and, of course, Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles so he really stretched the Jewish thinking; he was really challenging the status quo when he said, "No, Christ is the one and only true Savior, your Messiah, and also he has come to save his own from among the Gentiles." So Paul got into a lot of problems with these guys. Literally they were trying to kill him from time to time. So Paul said, "When I came to you, you elders at Ephesus, you know I was in a tough situation."

But, verse 20, that all being the case, "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." He said, "Even though it was hard, even though the pressure was on, I faithfully preached to you the whole counsel of God. All the body of doctrine that God has ordained that we learn and understand and know, even those parts that cause people to get uncomfortable, even those parts that cause people to question my ministry, call my authority into account, whatever it may be, whatever the consequence, I faithfully preached the whole counsel of God."

Then, of course, he summarizes in verse 21 and that always wraps up in the central message of God, "of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." Let me say just a word about repentance toward God. The idea there is that before you are converted, you have a tendency, a proneness, a bent to resist God's law. You want to kind of bend the corners on God's righteous law. You want to explain away that the law doesn't really mean what it says it means. You want to excuse your own sin that, "Well, everybody is doing it." It's just a general overarching casting of doubt and discredit on God's holy and righteous law. He says, "That's the way we are naturally," and he said,

"but once God works on your heart, there becomes a repentance in your heart toward God and all of a sudden your heart changes to where you say, 'Even though I find myself even moment by moment as a miserable failure to this law, the law is right and I'm wrong. The law is holy but I'm unholy. The law is good, I'm the one who is bad. There is nothing wrong with God and nothing wrong with God's law. I repented of that viewpoint. There has been a change of heart to now I see even though I violate it often, I see God's law is truly good and righteous and holy. I'm the problem.'" You see, you can't get saved until you see God's law and esteem it and honor it and respect it for what it is. You don't tone down God's law to hopefully more sinners will like our Gospel. No, no, no. Never, never, never. You uphold God's law and call all of us lawbreakers and transgressors to find our salvation in Jesus Christ. So Paul said, "That's the summarizing message of everything I preached and I preached all the corresponding doctrines to you."

Now verse 22, "And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me." I'm going to Jerusalem and I know at the minimum I'm going to be accosted, incarcerated, put in prison, whatever.

Verse 24, "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God." Paul said, "As this apostolic office was assigned to me, I am purposing to fill out my assignment, whatever that means, whatever the cost. That's what I'm trying to do."

Verse 25, "And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God." Basically he reiterates again, "When I was preaching to you, I preached all the truth God has for the church." I just don't think there are too many pastors in America today that can say, "I am innocent of the blood of those under my voice because I preached to them faithfully the whole counsel of God." That's a difficult and challenging thing to do in this day and age. Paul said he was faithful to do that.

Now he gives them the exhortation which was burning in his heart for them. Look at it in verse 28, "Be on guard for yourselves," now, he's talking to these elders of the local church at Ephesus, the book we are studying through, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among," whom or, "which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." Verse 29, "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears." So Paul says, "In this final meeting before I go to Jerusalem and at the minimum I am put in bonds and incarcerated, one thing I've got to tell you, elders at the church at Ephesus, is be on the alert, be vigilant to guard the church from the disunifiers that will undoubtedly come against you. Some will come in from the outside dressed as sheep but they are really

wolves. Some will rise up from within your own ranks and their goal is disunity, to draw away," his word is, "to take some believers away with them to follow their little niche or their little viewpoint of how it ought to be." So isn't that interesting? When you get to Ephesians 4, Paul gives his first clear practical admonition to the church at Ephesus and what is it about? Unity in the local church. As he is traveling to Jerusalem, knows his life is short at hand, or his death is short at hand, he calls to these elders to come a long way from Ephesus and his one clear word of admonition is, "Guard, guard, guard the church from the satanic inspired disunity that Satan will try to infuse into people and bring in his local church."

Now let me remind you that all that the Scriptures tell us about unity and oneness in the church is just that, it's for the local church. These truths simply don't work, they simply do not apply in other fellowships or groups. Now, you can pull out a concept or two and it is helpful in any organization because Paul is going to talk about one aspect of unity is to be unselfish and any organization you're in, if you can get people to be unselfish, they'll have something of a better unity, but that has nothing to do with all that he is saying here a true, Christian, local, church unity is. So it applies to the church.

Do you have the Confession Statement to put up there? I want just for us to look afresh and anew at the New Hampshire Confession which is our Confession. The New Hampshire Confession is a statement of faith from 1833 in New Hampshire. There were a lot of Baptists up there. Today you could probably go across the whole state and scarcely find a Baptist. But this is sort of one of the foundation stone doctrinal statements of Baptists in America. "We believe that a visible church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers." Now, there are a lot of Bible study groups and a lot of things, but that's not a church. A church is a congregation of baptized believers, "associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel," that is, what brought us together is the Gospel has changed us, "observing the ordinances of Christ," that's baptism in the Lord's supper, "governed by his laws," that's the Scriptures, "and exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by his word; that its only proper officers are Bishops, or Pastors, and Deacons, whose qualifications, claims, and duties are defined in the epistles to Timothy and Titus." Now that's an old statement of faith about what the local church is and there are many others older than this and they all basically say the same thing. I believe that. That's what a church is. Again, there are other groups, organizations, ministries, but they are not the church and these truths apply to the church. It's about a local, biblical, New Testament church.

Now, all that, go back to Ephesians again. I just wanted you to see that final exhortation he gave to the elders of Ephesus and how, once again, he strongly hits the theme of unity which corresponds with what he is exhorting them upon or about, rather, in Ephesians 4:1 through 6, or really 1 through 8 or so. So in just a quick quick running summary, I mean, we've spent hours on this already. First of all in verse 1 of Ephesians 4, he says, "I beg you." The New American Standard uses the word "I implore you to maintain this God authored, this God empowered, this God ordained unity you are to have." In other words, church members and pastors, you're to work really hard at making sure we don't just get along, we don't just tolerate, but we walk in this special unity God has ordained for us.

In verse 2, he talks about be humble and have gentleness and patience and tolerate one another in love. Basically what he's saying in verse 2 is, "98% of the stuff you'll get at odds with with another believer, you ought to just forget it and get over it. Just forget it. Have patience with them. Just go on. It just doesn't amount to anything." Now, if somebody is teaching Jesus is not virgin born or the Bible is not authoritative, then we ought to get upset about that but 98% of the stuff that most congregations have issues over are petty nonsense. You just need to get over it and go on. Say, "I love my brother. He's a pain in the neck sometimes. I love him anyway." And just go on, amen?

Have you learned that God has some peculiar sheep? Yeah, you are one of them. Here's my point: those peculiar sheep are for your sanctification. That's why God put them in your small group so you could learn to love them and just say no to yourself a lot. Pastors get peculiar sheep for their own sanctification. Say, "He can learn to love those that God puts in his church and not all those that are just like him."

Verse 3, he said, "being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit." It is the Holy Spirit that enables this unity. The Holy Spirit convicts and draws sinners. The Holy Spirit regenerates sinners, evidenced by repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ. He says, "Understand something, you didn't pick this church, God put you in this church." Well, yeah, there is a human side, I do understand that. You do make a decision. You do come to Christ and we are to teach that, but the Scriptures don't let us dwell on that very often. It makes us dwell on the fact that God did this. The Spirit wrought this unity. He made us one together. He made us who we are.

In verse 4, he uses the image of the body, the local church is a body, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling." So we are all separate in our diverse gifts and abilities but we are all one whole just like a body has separate organs but it is to function as one.

Then he says you are the called ones. You have one hope of your calling. Back up in verse 1, worthy of the calling with which you have been called. You are ekklesia, the church, New Testament were used over 90 times to define local New Testament churches. It means "called out ones." You didn't call yourself out, he called you out from the world or any other entity being the center or the mainstay of who you know and fellowship with. You are called from that and now the mainstay or the foundation of the group you belong to is the church. You are called out from the others to this. You may be in other stuff but that's at best secondary to your local church affiliation. God called you into the fellowship of the church. Notice how unified we should be, how one we should be.

Verse 5, one Lord. We all subject ourselves to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. That certainly makes us one. Then he goes on tom "one faith and one baptism and one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all." And that's what we're going to talk about this morning are those three things: one faith, one baptism and one God and Father.

So let's go to IV. This is new material now. We're talking about one faith. I'm convinced at this point Paul is not talking about the saving faith that began at regeneration and you continue to be a faither as you live your life, that is, you continue calling on the Lord from a heart of faith that says, "Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, you're my only hope. You're my only forgiveness. I can't trust in me. You are the one." So here we have this concept of the faith now not being saving faith but this is the doctrine we hold, the faith, the Christian faith, you could say. All right?

So it's like in Galatians 1:23 where Paul says he is now preaching the faith, he is now preaching the doctrines he once tried to destroy. And Jude 1:3, we are to earnestly contend for the faith. In other words, knowing none of us have a complete comprehension and perfect understanding of the doctrines that make up the Christian faith, but we know the basic doctrinal truths and we all affirm those together and that makes us one. So it's the body of doctrine we all embrace, that we intellectually at least to an extent, grasp and that with our hearts we embrace. Now get that. It's not mere intellectualism. That's involved. Christianity always comes through the mind but it never ends there. With our minds we begin to grasp these great doctrines as they are preached and taught and as we study them ourselves, and then with our hearts we treasure them and hold to them and that makes us one. I don't know about you but I've been in some settings lately, just some meetings I went to, etc., and I wasn't around people that held to and embraced these doctrines, and when I'm around people who do not, I miss the people who do. I miss those people. I miss you. I miss the fellowship of people who embrace these doctrines with their heart.

So this Gospel doctrine, this Bible doctrine, you can say it either way, has inwardly altered us forever. So we are together and have a oneness and a unity, though not yet perfected, but one day it will be perfected. So we are all of one faith, one doctrine of belief. Now we can disagree on secondary doctrines and, say, things dealing with eschatology, end time events. We can disagree on that a lot and still be fine but there are core doctrines of the Christian faith we are in agreement on and that holds us together.

But not only one faith, the apostle continues as if he can't say enough about the oneness and unity we ought to strive to maintain as a people. He says not only one Lord, one faith, but then he says one baptism. One baptism. Now, give me some freedom here to drift off of disunity for just a second and talk about a couple of things that I think are important. The ordinance of baptism for us is not a sacrament. We do not view the partaking of the ordinances of baptism or the Lord's supper as acts, rituals or works that helps us be saved or justified before God. Can I get an amen right there? We don't hold to that. Sacramentalism basically teaches whether it's our Church of Christ friends or our Roman Catholic friends and their orthodoxy would teach that the activity of going through the ordinance, the ritual, actually administers to you a saving grace. Especially in Catholicism, the priest has the special office, if you will, where he can administer the Mass and through administering that, you literally get the bread, the body of Christ, you literally receive the juice, the blood of Christ, and so in effect you have to keep being faithful to that so you can keep getting the saving power of Christ in your life. Do you

know what that is? It's silly superstition. That's all it is. I don't care how sincere they are. It doesn't matter to me. That's not how a person gets salvation or forgiveness.

However, it's amazing to me how in congregationalist life, we are a congregationalist type church, Baptist churches are almost exclusively congregational in final authority, that is, guys can get so off course. It came to my mind and I'm talking 35-36 years ago I was asked to go and preach at a county seat Baptist church in rural southwestern Kentucky. And I mean, I'm green as a gourd. I mean, I haven't been converted long and they were looking for a pastor. Now, I wasn't going in view of a call but I knew they were looking for a pastor and they were kind of interested in me and so I agreed to go up there just to preach for them, talk a little bit. So when I went up there, I stayed in the home of the patriarch of the church. You might call him the head deacon. A nice man and I think a good man but I wasn't in his house a couple of hours when he began to extol the virtues of Herbert W. Armstrong and the Worldwide Church of God which is 100%, no question about it, a cult. Herbert W. Armstrong was a false teacher. I mean, it was just commonly known. And I didn't say much about it and I figured this was a good man that just wasn't well taught.

So that was the first thing that happened. I preached that morning and then the leading men of the church, I don't remember if we had lunch or not, but I remember sitting in the auditorium there, their little chapel, and they were grilling me about things. Do you know what the number one thing, I mean the number one thing they had to know and they were going to die on this mountain and this was the way it was, do you know what it was? We will only use actual fermented wine when we take the Lord's table. That was it. I guess you could have been a mass murderer as long as you had real wine in the Lord's supper, you're okay here. My point being they didn't even get the Gospel. They didn't grasp the new birth. They didn't know the truth of God on things that mattered but they had this extra biblical incidental concept of it's got to have real alcohol in the wine or it's not the real Lord's supper. Where is that in the Bible? And it's just amazing how many people get hung up on these things and they don't need to.

Now, baptism is very important and the mode of baptism, Paul says we are of one baptism, immersion only. That's what we hold because that's clearly what the New Testament teaches. However, churches today, Baptist churches in particular, need to spend a little less energy on immersion only from time to time and a little more energy on what is the Gospel, what is true repentance, what does saving faith really look like, because it doesn't matter if you immerse everybody in your church 12 different times by the time they are 80 if they have not been born again, and it's the truth that reaches the soul into salvation. All I'm talking about is perspective and balance.

You remember in the Gospels, Jesus' disciples were walking through a grain field on the Sabbath and they picked some grain and they began to eat the grain and the Sadducees and the Pharisees said, "Ah-ha! Jesus, your disciples are lawbreakers and sinners. They are harvesting on the Sabbath," for picking grain. And Jesus in effect says, "Do you know what? You understand the letter of the law but you completely miss the spirit of the law.

God didn't make man for the Sabbath, he made the Sabbath for man. You have missed the whole thing."

So we could go on and on with this and I'll let it be at that but let me make it clear: we practice baptism by immersion only and we will teach others that that's the only proper mode of baptism but I'll be honest with you, if I meet a brother and he's a member of another denomination and he has every mark of genuine humility, a humble, repentant attitude about his lostness and his sin, a joyous faith in Christ, and every evidence of the new birth, I'm not going to hammer him about believer's baptism. If he has been sprinkled or poured, I'm not going to beat up on him about immersion. Well, I may not hammer him about immersion, I may chisel on him about it a little bit. My point is, let's keep the main thing the main thing without neglecting these other important things. I mean, we have thousands, I'm not exaggerating, thousands of congregations where every member has been immersed in the waters of baptism and they can't remember a decade or decades back when they had true, spiritual, Christian unity in their church. "We got baptism right." Well, don't miss that but get the priorities down.

So when he says one baptism, he doesn't mean some magical sacrament that did something in your eternal heart that saved you. What he means is you have all boldly made a public profession that Jesus is your Savior and your Lord and that makes you all one. And by the way, baptism in this context really really meant something. When they publicly identified with Christ in this Greco-Roman culture that at least for their subculture in the big culture was a Jewish dominated culture, they were putting their employment on the line, they were putting their social standing on the line, they were putting their lives sometimes on the line. It really meant something so what Paul is saying is, "You guys know what you put on the line when you were all publicly pledging your allegiance to Jesus Christ in baptism in your present culture."

I'm convinced in our culture today, baptism doesn't mean enough. I don't know that we shouldn't put the baptistery out in front of the church and elevate it real high and put it on public media everywhere, put up a lighted sign, put the names of the people that are being baptized. We do that for weddings. We proclaim it everywhere, do we not? Because a new social order is going to be established. These two individuals are now becoming one in holy marriage and that's important to publish that. Now don't get what I'm saying confused with some of the gimmicky frivolous baptismal services that are being promoted by these cool churches today. I didn't make up "cool church," that's what the pastor at one of these churches says, "And we've got the cool factor." Can I say something to you, brothers and sisters? There's nothing cool about baptism. There is something holy about it but not necessarily cool. There is something righteous about it but not necessarily cool. I'm not trying to make Jesus cool, I want Jesus to be true and I want you to love him the way he is. I'm not going to warp him into some contemporary mold and make him attractive to you. He is who he is and I love him just the way he is. The point is, the point I'm making in this Bible belt culture: baptism has lost the powerful statement that it had in the early church. But anyway, believer's baptism is one of the many things that unites us as one unique set apart people.

Then he concludes with, "one God and Father of us all," verse 6, "who is over all and through all and in all." Now back up in verse 4, he said the church is one because we are pervaded by one Spirit. In verse 5, he says the church and when I say church I mean the local church, the church is one because it is owned and governed by one Lord. Now in verse 6, the church is one because it has one God and Father, one glorious being to whom it looks as a child looks to a parent.

Then he says God is over all and through all and in all. What does that mean? I'm not sure. It means this is just all of God, completely of God. He pervades everything and everyone with his life-giving presence. John 17:21 as Jesus gives his high priestly prayer to the Father on behalf of his children, he says, "that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You," notice we are just all in each other, "that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me." So God is over all his church, he is throughout all his church, and he is in all of his church. Now earlier he used the metaphor of the body, like there are different organs in the body but you take medicine, it affects all the members. It gets in all the members inside there and that's the way God is.

So what a glorious unity. Now listen, God is over all, he is in all, he is through all, and there is one magnanimous maxim of God: he cannot be divided. God is one. The Shema, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one God!" So if this is all of God, it's through God's work and God's Spirit and God's Son who died on the cross and the Spirit who brings the effects of that death to our lives and saves us, the Spirit regenerates us, the Spirit sanctifies and keeps us, and one day he will glorify us, and it is all of God, God can't be divided. When there are factions and divisions and a party spirit, either someone doesn't have God, someone is not submitting to God, or doesn't know God. Something is wrong. God has gotten out of the picture somewhere because no matter what happens in a true church, we can resolve it without disunity. Did I say dissolve it or resolve it? Either one works.

So notice the logical order. Verse 4, he says first the Spirit is involved and he is the one that convicts and regenerates and adds you to the church. Secondly, he talked about the Lord, the Son; he's the one we believe upon whose work saved us. Then third, the Father, he's the one that is glorified when we all function like we are supposed to in the body. So this striking and unifying truth comes forth: the church is God's church. It is composed of God's people, the result of God's work, and it all exists for God's glory.

Look back at Ephesians 3:21, just right there in front of chapter 4 in a summarizing statement of all the doctrine he laid out before, he got to this exhortation in chapter 4, what is this summarizing truth? Ephesians 3:21, "to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus." At this point, the apostle says, "God's church is so central, so vital, so foundational to all he's about, he has equated his glory to Jesus Christ with Christ's body, the church." In this case, they are put on an equal level. God is glorified in his church and in Jesus Christ and not only for time but also for eternity. Ephesians 3:1, "to all generations forever and ever. Amen." What a truth.

You say, "Wait a minute, how can the church be as glorious as Jesus?" The church is Jesus' body. The church is the result of his work. Jesus spoke the stars into existence, he spoke the solar system into existence, he made the deer and the plants and the mountains and the rivers. He is the author of all of that but his magnanimous work, his crowning work is his church. That shows forth his wisdom, his power and his beauty like nothing else. I've seen some glorious sunsets and some sunrises lately and I'm always reminded only God can do that and that's not to be compared with the glory of the glorified bride, the church, when he gets through with us. So let's be unified.

So let's remind ourselves as we circle the field and come four or five statements to end with, this entire treatise on unity is for the local church. It simply does not apply and it simply does not work in any other group, organization, even other Christian organizations. That's not who and what this is written to. It is written to a local church of baptized believers who observe the ordinances who are overseen by elders and served by deacons, who function under Christ's law. It's the unique entity, body, that he has made for his own glory.

Now for a final exhortation, I want you to listen now, and humble yourself as I share these things. Let's remind ourselves that Satan works tirelessly and craftily to harm or destroy the unity of God's true local churches. You say, "Pastor, we've gone a long time and hasn't had any schisms or any..." Well, don't you think it's not going to happen or at least there will be no attempt to make it happen. Let me list some idols that Satan tempts you with. If he can get you to cling and worship some of these idols, he can harm the unity of the local church. All right, here are some of those idols.

1. The idol of power and control. That's what Absalom had. Remember Absalom outside of the gate of Israel? Absalom was bitter and unforgiving toward his father, King David, and Absalom wanted to bring him down. He wanted to remove him from power and put himself in power. And by the way, he succeeded. He ran David off the throne but God said, "No. Time out. David did do some things wrong, David did fail in some ways, but here is one thing you forgot, Absalom, he is my anointed as king." So God made sure Absalom, the first hippie in the Bible, got his long hair caught in those bogs of the tree limbs and one of David's commanders finished him off with a sword.

But getting back, power and control issues. I was preaching at a church long ago. It used to pastors would have me in to straighten their churches out. They don't do that much anymore. And I was preaching just basic stuff that you hear every week and the patriarch of this particular church caught me on the steps one night before the service and he laid into me and he was talking about this and talking about that, and I thought nothing he was saying mattered. It was stuff that just doesn't matter and then it occurred to me, here's the issue: if this church moves in a more biblical direction, he will lose his power. That's what he was afraid of and he will split the church before he will lose his power.

The idol of power and control. Now, every single one of you face this idol from time to time. Don't look at me spiritual. And so do I. But do you know what we've got to do?

We've got to keep being a repentor and say, "I will not damage God's church over my lust for power and control. I'm not going to do it."

2. The idol of unmet expectations. A person joins a church and very often they have something they want, something they desire. It doesn't have to be necessarily evil but they are kind of expecting it and if it doesn't pan out the way they want, then they are hurt and they are offended. If they didn't get that position, if they didn't get with that group, whatever it might be, and then often they will, like Absalom in their disappointment and in their bitterness, do things to destroy the unity of the church.

Do you have some secret idols of unmet expectations? "I should have been teaching that class. I should have been nominated as an elder. I should have... I should have... I should have..." Every single one of us has that idol floating across our hearts and we have to continue to be a humble repentor.

3. The idol of perverse loyalties. This is just simply you love the world. You've just got too many things in the world that are important to you. Too many things in the world that take your heart. Too many things in the world that take your time. Too many things in the world that take your energies. Too many things in the world that take your resources. So the church is missing the power of you being on board and it is a disunifying element.

Do you this morning say, "God, I ask you to help me repent to be more balanced and make sure your church is the center of my family's heart and involvement and not be ever increasing allurements of the world." Some of them are fine until they begin to crowd out what's most important, the church. The idol of perverse loyalties, just loving too many things out there.

I'll only just mentioned this: the idol of petty unforgiveness. Remember, the Apostle Paul pretty much began with this one about how you ought to be tolerant and patient and forgiving. Just get over stuff. Don't let it be an issue.

5. The idol of independent ministry. Independent ministry. Just be careful of your involvement in things outside of the local church. I was thinking as I was meditating on this, in the 37 or so years I've been here, it's been amazing how many great ministry movements have come and now they are gone. I mean, we were just, everybody, "Wow, this is the great new thing and God is all over this and it's wonderful!" and some of us to varying degrees, it wasn't sin, it wasn't evil but we gave our energies and gave our hearts and gave our investment and now it doesn't even hardly exist as a ministry anymore. But do you know what's still here? God's local church.

And some of these are good things and, by the way, some of these things we support and we are glad to but they cannot take the place of the local church having your heart and your energies and your investment of time and energy. When you give your energies to another ministry outside the local church, you're moonlighting and I'm not saying that's wrong, I'm just saying that's the way it is. Look, as your pastor, I will stand with you side-by-side at the judgment bar of God and if somehow God is disappointed because you

didn't spend enough energy on ministries outside of your local church, I'll say, "God, put the blame on me." I promise you I'll do that. Do you know why? The Bible makes it explicitly clear.

By the way, you can't support all the good stuff that comes floating by your desk if you're a businessman. Every week there's another good ministry you could be on and there is some good stuff out there but it is balance. The Fellowship of Christian Athletes, good stuff but it doesn't replace the local church. Are you listening to me? If your children make Fellowship of Christian Athletes the center of their Christian life, what are they going to do when school is out because they don't know how to serve God in the local church? Are you hearing me? It's always going to be here so don't let something that could be good become an idol.

I haven't said this like this in a long time but I pretty much end with this. At Grace Life Church, the hub of the wheel is congregational worship centered on the preaching of the word and the power of the Spirit. That's what we're doing right now. We have roughly 3 of those a week. If you are in choir, you've got choir on one of them, but three of those a week. If you come into those three with an open heart and a repentant attitude to grow, that takes a good bit of your energy. In addition to that, we have every member in ministry through small groups of biblical principle. And if you get in that small group and you're on the team and you're faithful and you care and you are praying and you are working with your brothers or sisters to evangelize the lost, equip the saved, and to be there to meet one another's needs, that takes a lot of time and energy. That takes a lot of hard. And if in addition to that you are faithful to try to embrace personalized strategic world missions and have a heart for the globe and a heart for God's glory to the ends of the earth, all the ministries we are involved in all around the world, I can't keep up with it and I'm the human instrument that mostly built it. My point is it takes a lot of energy and time and heart. And then the supporting ministries that support those four major ministries. I put family discipleship in there as something else that is an extension of the local church. Here's my point: if you really do those right, you haven't got much heart, energy and time left. "Well, pastor, what you need to do is back off and let me build my ministry out there." No, maybe you need to get God's priorities as your priorities. Find yourself a sound biblical local church and pour yourself in there. If there is time for other things, I'm for you 110%.

Now look, I'm all about these young people having Christian fellowship at school. Amen? I'm all about in your workplace having some Bible studies with good brothers and sisters. That's wonderful. Amen? I mean, you've got to go to work anyway. Thank God you get to do something spiritual there and I know some of you have that and I praise God for that. I'm not against these things but the church is not just something you tack on to make yourself orthodox, it's the centerpiece. God's purposes and God's glory and we must be vigilant and intentional to maintain its unity and its oneness.

Sometimes we are not unified because you are preoccupied and if you keep being preoccupied with things that don't really matter, pretty soon the church will be vilified as your problem instead of the center of your life and the blessing of your life. You know,

there is something about the local church you do get out of it what you put into it, and I can say to you like the Apostle Paul said, "I am innocent of all men's blood," I can tell you for 37 years I've put my heart, soul and life into this church and have not one regret for it. As a matter of fact, I would wish that every pastor in the world could pastor a church like us. It's worth it. It's worth it. But some of you need to repent this morning of letting idols pull your heart, your energy, and your efforts to something that at best is secondary and not be centered here for God's glory.