

Church Unity: Its Ground and Its Nature

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Take your Bibles and let's go to Ephesians. Ephesians 4. Paul is just getting to his most specific exhortations about church life, how he wants us to conduct ourselves in the church, and he goes right dead center to the topic of unity in the church, showing us the great paramount importance that God puts on his church being unified. And one of the things we have to remind ourselves in the evangelical and Baptist saturated culture you and I are in, is that it's likely if not highly likely that some dear saints of God spend their whole lives and never get to really enjoy a church or a congregational setting with true spiritual unity; maybe touches of it here and there but for the most part, they don't really get to experience that and because of that, often they don't really understand what it is.

I believe that in God's grace, approaching three decades ago we began to put some things in place to reform some things here, trying to be more biblical and more sound. We certainly have had to repent a lot and change directions a lot, learn and do better. That's been the process but I'm convinced that God has honored and blessed those efforts and the result has been that we have enjoyed a long long season of sweet Gospel, Spirit-wrought unity in this church. I'm not saying you never get ill at somebody or aggravated, you just don't let it become an issue because what binds us together is just greater than the 1,001 little, I call them extra-biblical things. There are all kinds of extra-biblical things that people can get all wound up about that really don't matter but once you are Spirit-bought, truly Spirit-regenerated and growing in that, you just have a capacity to deal with things in a different way, and plus there is that beyond human comprehension magnetism one to another when they are all regenerated Spirit-wrought people bonding together in a local church.

Well again, we've been talking about this for some time but I wanted to spend a lot of energy here, number 1, because it's it greatly misunderstood and greatly missing element in church life today, and because the Apostle Paul gives it such a prominent place as far as how the truth of being saved should work itself out in our lives as a church family together. Let's look at it all, even the parts we've already looked at in Ephesians 4 and we'll read verses 1 through 6 in our text for today and we will deal primarily with 4 through 6, though I won't get through about a third of it, all right?

Verse 1 of chapter 4,

1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you

That's a strong statement, beg you. Now here Paul is, the first practical exhortation he is giving them, it's just so important to me, Paul says, that you

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

If you miss "of the Spirit," you haven't missed something important, you've missed everything. This is not our unity, it's the Spirit's unity. He creates it in us and through us.

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.

As I was saying earlier...by the way, I have just entitled this section "Church Unity: Its Ground and Nature." What's the ground and the true nature of a church. I'm talking about a team's unity. I'm not talking about a social organization's unity. I'm not talking about any type of unity that might be known in the secular world. There is a radical distinct unity that true born-again children of God in a local church experience together. So what is the ground and the nature of this unique thing called the unity of the Spirit.

Now, if you attend the typical church business meeting, you may not get the impression that that church belongs to God. As I've told you before, often in Baptist life, the churches are led by mob rule. If they have an important decision to make, it's not unusual for one or two or three or four groups to kind of get their leader and get their mob together and if they can cause enough racket and enough problems, a lot of the other church members who don't want to fool with it anyway just let them have their way and get it out of the way and keep the unity when, really, they're not keeping the unity, there is just indulging and tolerating the flesh which is not unity at all. But a church that is truly made up of those born again of the Spirit under the preaching of the Gospel, is Jesus' church, it's God's church.

One of my favorite sayings, Dr. Adrian Rogers I think was the first one I ever heard say it and that is that: remember, Jesus did not say he would build your church. He did not say we would build his church. He said, "Upon this rock I will build my church." It's his. It's all about him. The church is God's. It is by him, he is the author. It's through him, he's the means. It's for him, it's for his glory. That's why I've told you before you should not be able to explain a church. If you can explain, "Well, that church is successful because, well, the student program is so... Or that church is successful because the pastor is so unique and creative and... Or the music program is all these cool things..." If you can explain it that way, then God is not doing it. Now some of those things may be wonderful and good and I hope we always have strong children and student ministries, a wonderful song ministry or music ministry, and hopefully we will always have a strong Bible

preaching pulpit, but that's not who makes it work. It's God who uses his ordained means and he builds his church by his power through his ordained means. That's why we've got to be very careful to avoid any patterns of doing things outside of biblical means because God has not ordained to use your creative ideas, he has ordained to use his means to build his church because then it magnifies his wisdom, not yours, or mine, amen? It's about him being the author. His wisdom put it together. His power makes it happen and it is all for his glory.

Now, picking up on the topic of unity, starting in verse 4, did you notice seven times the word "one" is used? Seven times in verses 4, 5 and 6: one body, one Spirit, one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. I think the point that he is pointing out is this is all about unity. You can't be of this God and he's one and you be separate and distinct and in factions and divisions one toward the other. In verse 4 he says he is God the Spirit and he uses the phrase, "one body, one Spirit, one hope." In verse 5 he says he is the Lord or God the Son, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." And then in verse 6 he says he is God the Father, now he is God the Father of us all. So we have the whole Trinity, the Triune God who is one God and he is about unity more than anything else. As a matter of fact, you can't even conceive of God except as one God. He can't be divided up. He is indivisible.

And here is what he's saying: since you are of that kind of a God, one God, you can no more split the church than you can split the Godhead. Now, we might have a little at odds with somebody but I think that's why Jesus said, "If you are at odds with somebody, go and reconcile with your brother even before you come and bring your offering to the church," because that is a radically bad thing in the truth of who God is and you're supposed to be of God and by God and the God working through you and you can't be united to one another. It's inconceivable. As a matter of fact, in the Shema as it is called, which just means "to hear" in Deuteronomy 6:4, the Israelites would say together, "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!"

Now, in verse 4, I don't know if you've got the New American Standard, it's very clear. I don't know what translation. You ought to get you a New American Standard just for the preaching service if you don't have one. In verse 4, my Bible says and it is in italics, it says the two words "there is." It's in italics because it's not originally there. It's not in the original Greek. The translators put it in to try to help the understanding but I'm not so sure it translates better without it being there. For example, verse 3, "being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," then immediately, "one body, one Spirit, just as also you were called in one calling." Then in verse 5, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism," verse 6, "one God and Father of us all."

So the church is that invisible reality that's members are known truly only to God. Did you get that? There is an invisible reality. There is a spiritual reality that's real in all of us and interconnects us one to another that only God can see but it is invisible to the rest of us. This unity is present and settled in the mind of God. God says, "I only have one church and it is in unity."

So outwardly, though, and visible, there are diverse things about us but if a church is functioning with outward divisions and a church is functioning with groups and factions, you know, the Bible speaks of a factious man or a factious spirit, and a factious person is a person who gets them a group to overthrow the leadership and typically they either get their way with the leadership, remove the leadership, or if they're not strong enough to do that, they just split off and go somewhere else. And when a church has those kinds of things going on and it is fractured into these diverse groups, it has strayed so very very far from true biblical Christianity and it is just radically contrary to the very nature of God and the purposes of God for his people. So what we want to do is to maintain unity in the local assembly and to maintain visibly what God maintains invisibly, what God knows is true about us in the spirit world.

John 13:35, I love this verse because a lot of people ask, "Well, how are we going to impact the world? What kind of things have we got to do to get people to God, all these things we do?" Well, one of the primary things, a foundational thing, is John 13:35, "all men will know that you are My disciples by the love you have one for another." Well, it may not be easy to walk in all the time but it's easy to understand. If you want to have a real impact on your community, then be a church that has a true spiritual unity. There is a power to that, a Gospel power.

So we have this flow of exhortation here and when you get to verse 3 before you get to the actual area we're exegeting tonight, he has that strong statement, "be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Earlier in verse 1, "I beg you or I implore you to walk in this manner that will produce this kind of peace." So you ask yourself, "Why are we to be so diligent, which means to spare no effort, to have haste and passion, the full effort of the whole man needs to be involved in this, why so strong a command?" Because the Godhead is the sum and the substance of why we exist as a church. You cannot have more unity because there can't be more than one Godhead. He is already here. He is here with us as the Father, he is here with us as the Son, he's here with us as the church, and you can't be more united than he is. Now he's saying, "I want you to live out what you are." We are of him and we are to reflect him. He created us to be one.

Now, let's go to the text here and we'll not be very long but he says there, first of all, we'll only look at two of these and that is the body and the Spirit. There is one body and one Spirit. Now, when he says there is one body, I think he's talking about the local church body. There is not, well, you've got this church over here and they do things this way, and you've got this part of a church over here, well, they are a part of this thing, and this part of the church is over there, they are part of another thing. No, there is only one body. We can't be divided up like that into segments and I really dislike the notions in churches that, well, they've got their repelling group. They go and they repel down rocks and that's the group part of the church bonds with. They've got, well, this group, they are motorcycle riders and they all bond together to do their motorcycle riding. I'm not saying that's wrong but that's not why you connect to a church because it does your cool thing. You connect to a church because Christ saved you as a wretched sinner and it doesn't matter if anybody in a true church does your cool thing, you are still bonded to them. That's the foundation stone, it's, "God has changed my heart."

There is one body and when he says here in verse 4, there is only one body, this is not an exhortation, it's a declaration. He's not saying be one body, he says you are one body, now act like it. That's where he's coming from. He's not saying let us be united in one body. This is not something we do, it's something he did. He apprehended you. He convicts you by the work of the Spirit. He saw to it that you were under the Gospel. He saw to it that the Gospel crushed you and broke you and left you bankrupt at the foot of the cross. He enabled you to repent and place your faith in Christ. He did it and when he does that to all of you as individuals, then he brings you together and you are one because you have all experienced the same thing the Spirit has wrought in your hearts. And that's why the Bible says we ought to be willing to lay down our lives for the brethren because what we have in common is stronger than anything we have with any blood relative who may not know or love Christ. It doesn't mean we don't love our blood relatives. Of course we do, but when you know Christ and love him and are growing in him, you find your bond with other Spirit-wrought beings is stronger than any other bond. By the way, it lasts forever and your bond to your blood relatives ends at death. Are you hearing me? There is nothing as strong as this, nothing as long-lasting as this.

So this is a declaration, not an exhortation. It's not something we do, it's something he did, it's something we are. Romans 12:5 reminds us, "so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." To the Corinthians he said, 1 Corinthians 10:17, "Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread." Now, Jesus being the bread there. We have all gone and we have partaken of Christ and he has come into us and radically transformed us, therefore made all of us very different people, naturally speaking. All of us very different, very different personalities, very different likes, very different things we dislike, etc. etc., but we have all partaken of one bread, the bread of heaven, Jesus Christ.

So he uses the metaphor of a body, we are one body. A couple of thoughts there. First of all, a body works together though it has many diverse parts. Secondly, it's organic. A body has living organisms that grow by the multiplication of cells. The body is organic. The body is not a machine. It's not like an automobile engine. It's not like a watch. It's not like a sewing machine. The body is an organic living thing and that's what we are in Christ.

It's a little long but listen to 1 Corinthians 12:21 through 26 and he's talking about the local church body working together, though we are all different, we are all connected and dependent on each other. "And the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you; or again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our unseemly members come to have more abundant seemliness, whereas our seemly members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body," the local church family you could say, "giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, so that there should be," here it is, "no division in the body, but that the members should have the

same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it."

So God created us to be interdependent. Your kidneys have to have the heart, and the kidneys and the heart have to have the lungs, and you can go on and on with the organs of your body. They have different functions but they all are interdependent and that's the way God says the body of Christ is. God created us to be interconnected like your nerves, your blood vessels, your ligaments, your tendons. There is an interconnectivity there and it all thrives when it is all working together. It's living and growing.

Have you ever thought about it, it's a beautiful thing when all of your organs are in there doing what they are supposed to do. I thought about my grandchildren, when I thought about this, they have little kidneys and they have little hearts and they have little lungs, they have all these little organs and when it's all in there, they're just running around carefree and it's just a beautiful thing. But if you take a kidney out and put it on the table, it's not an attractive thing. It's got to be in the context of a living organism and functioning there and that's the way God uses an individual. You are not a Lone Ranger. No man is an island in God's church. Every one of us is radically – listen to me – radically interdependent and interconnected one to another. Even you might say, "Well, I'm the least helpful and the least effective and the least gifted." Yeah, but Paul said those unseemly members become even the more seemly. Those dishonorable members, at least in a man's determination, they are not really dishonorable but in a man's determination, that which is of least honor God says, "I will make it the most honorable." That's why the rest of the folks who are not here on Sunday night ought to be here because we need them and they don't think it but they need us. And you go and call them when you get home and tell them I said that. If you give me their names, I may call them. I know some of them. I'm not beating them up, I'm just saying you're missing out. As I said earlier in my prayer, God didn't make us so much to be like individual marbles in a bag, but we are more like chunks of chocolate in a double boiler. That's the way we are bonded together one with the other in the body of Christ.

So his point is when God's Spirit has changed you through the Gospel, you didn't do that. God did that. You didn't choose that first, God chose you first and then you repented and responded, choosing him as Lord and Savior, of course. And since God did that work and God made you a new Spirit-wrought reborn being, then God made you a part of this interconnected thing called the local church family, the body of Christ.

Well, he gives another one. He says you are one body, you may have different gifts, different roles, different jobs etc. etc., but you are one body, but also: and one Spirit. And one Spirit. Now, it's very important and it's a grievous thing to me to observe a Christian congregation that functions with a human spirit, not a Holy Spirit. We're not put together, I'm not talking about the human spirit. Sometimes we talk about the great human spirit. By the way, that is a great thing and it's a beautiful thing because we are made in the image of God. There is something about the creature called human beings, there is a spirit about us that is special. But that's not what this is talking about.

It's been years ago. This might ring a bell to some of you. There was a boy, I forgot what he was doing, but I think he was out hiking. He was out in a wilderness area and a huge boulder fell on his arm. Y'all remember anything about that story? That boy literally, I think it was his pocketknife, took out a knife and sawed his arm and bone off and he survived. That tells you something about the human spirit, but if that kind of spirit is what causes us to be together, we are in sin. We are not talking about the human spirit. Saved people have the human spirit and unsaved people have the human spirit. God's children have the human spirit and those who are still Satan's children have the human spirit. We are not talking about what brings us together as the human spirit. We are not talking about a team spirit, you know, that feeling of unanimity, that unity a group can have around certain goals or certain projects. I mean, they are one in enthusiasm. You might say they are one in heart. And that's a special thing because we are made in the image of God and there is something beautiful and special about that but that is not a biblical church unity. It's not about the human spirit, it's not about team spirit, something far more glorious and wonderful and more powerful than that. We are all one because the work of one Spirit has worked in each of us individually and changed us.

2 Corinthians 5:17, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation, the old things have passed away; behold, all things have become a new." And I sometimes just can't help but think about my own experience. I'm 18 years of age, I'm driving my car back to Middle State Tennessee University as a freshman in college. I turn on the radio and I hear the Gospel and I'm born again in my car. Now, I guess technically it could have happened in the following week or two or three, because I remember feeling the weight of sin grow greatly in my heart and mind over the next few weeks. But I knew I was a great sinner and I know Christ was my Lord and Savior and I loved him and the strangest thing began to happen immediately, I began to aggressively change the people I hung out with, and if I didn't change it, they changed it for me. They didn't want to be around me anymore. What's the difference? I turned the radio on, for heaven's sake, in my car driving back to college, hear the Gospel and now all of a sudden I connect to and link to and am drawn to a radically different group than I was drawn to before. I understood human spirit before that, I understood something about team spirit, I played on a lot of athletic teams, but I all of a sudden had a new spirit in me that was drawn to a different kind of person, other Christians.

His Holy Spirit does this. One Spirit. One unified Spirit creates a new person and as Paul said in Ephesians 2:10, "For we are His workmanship." Why do we all bond together? Why do we all feel interconnected? Why do we feel like one? What is this going on? Because each individual here is the workmanship of one God. The God that changed me, changed you. That God changed you, changed you. And the God that changed you, changed you. And the God that changed you, changed you. And the God that changed you, changed you. And you're all by yourselves over there, all right? No, the God that changed them, changed you. We are all changed by the one God that causes us to have this unity.

Now, a lot of you have been in church a lot of years and a lot of you have been faithful in church a lot of years and you know the difference. You know the difference between a

congregation that's just trying to get along and a spiritual unity in a healthy church. You know the difference. You have sensed it. You have seen it and you have experienced it. And by the way, I believe there are many dear and good saints of God in practically all of our churches out there, but unfortunately many of them never know the sweet blessedness of healthy spiritual church life where there is a oneness of the Spirit. And that's a sad thing, is it not? That's a sad thing.

So we are all new creations. "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works," Paul said, Ephesians 2:10, "which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." We are all wrought by one all-powerful Spirit, therefore we are all one. Just as the human body is one because it is indwelt by a living soul, so the church, the local church family is one because it is indwelt by a living Spirit.

Now let me give you some quick conclusions for practical application. There is a whole lot more to say and we'll pick that up next time we're together. But we are, of course, to be striving to visibly live out and display the unity that already exists in the mind of God. You remember in Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17, do you remember one of the primary, kind of when he comes to a summary point in his prayer to the Father and he's praying on behalf of those who believe on him, his children, and he says, "Father, I pray that they may be one just as we are one." I mean, of all the things Jesus prays for, it seems like the top on his list is, "Make sure my children are walking in a oneness and a unity because nothing so distracts from who we are, Father, than my children acting like they are not one because we are always one." Do you hear me? There has never been a fraction of a second in time or eternity when God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit weren't exactly on the same page together in perfect unity.

So his children ought to walk in that same Spirit. That's why in these early exhortations, he basically said, "Get over stuff. Let it go. It doesn't matter. Keep the unity that God put there and don't let the old flesh man cause some sort of disunity." Now some people would think, "Well, he's preaching that because there's a problem." I'm telling you, there is not a problem I know unless you are sneaking out somewhere and having a problem I don't know about. And if you are, don't bring it in, I don't want to see it or hear about it. No, there is no special need but we need to always be reminded, amen?

Four conclusions for practical application. 1. Compare this to positional and progressive sanctification. In other words, we know that when we are saved positionally, we are set apart unto God. We are fully his though we are not fully with him yet and we are not perfected yet but positionally we are sanctified, but we are also progressively being sanctified, are we not? We are in this journey of progressively becoming more Christ like. Now, our unity situation, it is settled in the mind of God that we are one, spiritually one, settled, done forever, but we've got to keep striving to live out that reality and act more unified as God leads us onward.

Now 2, it's essential if we are going to have a visible unity, an outworking of unity, that we have some corrective discipline in the church. This is why the only command when you are dealing with corrections in the New Testament, you know the Bible sequence is if

you see a brother in sin, one person goes to him always confidentially, always humbly and kindly, never talking to anybody else about it, you go to the person alone, confront them about the sin in love and in kindness. If they repent, it's over, if they don't repent, you take one or two more with you. If they don't repent, you tell it to the church and eventually they are to be removed. That's the pattern except there is an exception or two in the New Testament and one of the exceptions is in Titus 3:10, "Reject a factious man after a first and second warning." He bumps up the sequence for a factious man. What he saying is if somebody is actively trying to break the unity of the church, get on it quick. Stop them quickly.

I told you earlier, I think in this little sequence of a man who was here not too long ago who began to pick off some of our staff and they would pull the staff aside and say, "What do you think about Brother Jeff..." And the staff member would look at them and say, "We don't do that here. If you've got an issue, you need to go and see Brother Jeff." Well, he never would come and see me and then he would pick off another staff member and say, "What about Brother Jeff..." "Sir, we don't do that here. The biblical way to handle that, if it's unbiblical, I guarantee the pastor will change that. Show him it's unbiblical. We'll deal with it. He'll go to the elders, but we don't start a group." Then he felt led to go to another church and I feel that he was being led to go to another church.

Now look, a person can get off track and do something dumb like that and then humble themselves and get back on track, amen? That's fine. Hey, look, we all do stuff like that. Do you know what I'm going to do when a person gets off track and repents and says, "Man, I don't need to be like that"? I'm going to hug their neck and say, "Welcome. You're a sinner just like me." But I mean somebody that just persists in it. If you don't deal with that, you will allow the lodging, you will allow a beachhead of satanic factious disunity in God's church and the witness of the church is killed, and Paul says that is a priority. You have to have a commitment to deal with a willful, ongoing, brazen, factious, divisive spirit in God's church. Now let me say this again: I and the church elders are very capable of needing correction from time to time. If you see something that is clearly wrong, please help us. Please help us. I'll guarantee you, we'll receive you. Open your Bible and show us where we are missing it and we will receive it. But we're not going to tolerate an ongoing, factious, divisive spirit. That's just destroying the unity of the church.

Well, also the scoffer. The scoffer is mentioned in Proverbs 21:11. Let me say this first about a scoffer: a scoffer means to deride, to mock; they are always calling things into question; they are always critical; they are always faultfinding. Now again, some of us fall into that from time to time but you don't need to make a hobby out of it or a profession out of it. Let's don't be that way in God's church. Proverbs 21:11, "When the scoffer is punished, the naive becomes wise; But when the wise is instructed, he receives knowledge." In other words, when you deal with the scoffer, you help those who are on track to do even better. Proverbs 22:10, "Drive out the scoffer, and contention will go out, Even strife and dishonor will cease." So you have to deal with some things from time to time.

Now, our approach here at Grace Life and it's not just me or the church elders, but I think body wide is, if somebody gets off track and somebody says something they shouldn't, somebody does something that has kind of this disunifying aspect to it, we don't even pay attention to it at first until it becomes a pattern and then it will be dealt with. That's the only way you're going to guard and be diligent and be – what else does he say – I beg you to maintain this unity, the only way you are going to do that is have a commitment to corrective discipline in the church.

Number 2 was corrective, number 1 was view it positionally. We are positionally unified in God's mind but we progressively have to work it out down here. Number 2 was you have to deal in corrective discipline. Now, number 3, conclusion for practical application: guard unity by understanding that Satan's greatest ploy is to infiltrate the church. Did you hear that? More than anything else in Satan's MO is to infiltrate the church with false professors of faith. To infiltrate the church with false confessors, those who claim to be sheep but are really goats.

Boy, I don't have time to look it all up but we know that Satan is most concerned about anyone else getting the glory other than himself. Satan wants the glory. He does not want Christ to get the glory. But where does Christ get the most glory? The local church. When the church is right, Christ gets the most glory in time and eternity. Ephesians 3:21, "to Him be the glory," Paul says, "in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever." So Satan doesn't like that so he's going to try to get in and mess things up. That's always been his modus operandi.

So we have to be very careful to guard the church and two aspects of this, as a matter of fact, let me give you three subpoints under this understanding Satan's greatest ploy is to infiltrate the church. 1. We must guard the front door. Baptists have been a colossal failure in guarding the entrance way of the church. Our Baptist forefathers, I would challenge you to do what I made a diligent study of for several years, and that is study how our forefathers viewed evangelism and letting members into the church. You know, there was a time when if somebody were to join the church, he would come down here with the pastor and you would have a church business meeting and stuff and they would stand there with the pastor and the church members could quiz them about whether or not to see if their conversion sounded sound or not, whether or not their testimony of salvation sounded real because they were saying, "We're not going to mess this up. We are not going to let them mess this up if they're not really one that God has saved."

And somehow we got away from some of that, and I'm not saying that's the only way to do it, I'm just saying it shows our forefathers had a very serious commitment to the front door of the church being guarded. The Bible says in Acts 2, "and the Lord added to their number," and it's the elders' responsibility to wisely, always lovingly, always with a sweet and compassionate spirit, but to be careful and thorough about those who come into the family of God. You're never going to maintain the spiritual unity Paul says is absolutely essential and is at the top of his priority list for his exhortations to the church, if you don't guard the front door.

Boy, there was a time, do you remember the days when somebody would walk down the aisle and we would spend five minutes in a counseling session and then we would present them as members? I stopped that quite quickly after I became your pastor and one of the reasons why, we had a man and a woman come down, spent five minutes in counseling, we presented them out there, we presented them to the church and found out they were shackled up and living in fornication and I said, "Time out." We're going to have to learn to guard the front door of the church, amen? And approaching two and half or so decades ago, we changed a lot of things and we're still learning and changing but at least we are in this battle here to do what's right.

John Dagg was the first writing Baptist scholar in America, by writing, I mean the first man to publish his works, and John Dagg has always been considered sort of a foundation stone of Baptists in America. Here's what John Dagg said on receiving people into the church. Now, this is probably early eighteenth century, I would say. I'd have to look it up to be for sure but I think that's when he was writing. John Dagg said, "To receive anyone on a mere profession of words without any effort to ascertain whether they understood and feel what they profess is unfaithfulness to his interest and the interest of religion." He said, "You can't just receive members." Now here is our Baptist forefather, the foundation stone of Baptist scholarship in America and he says, "When you receive members into our local churches, you can't just take a person's word. Spend some time getting to know if they feel, if it is heartfelt and genuine."

Now, I'm not one for some sort of, okay, it's a six-month process, even though when we were preaching in Romania right after the fall of Ceausescu's communist regime, I mean, we were there right after Ceausescu was executed and the believers had been mercilessly persecuted and they would not let you join the church for a year. If you came and said, "God has saved me. I know I have been wrought upon by the Spirit. I have come to see my wretchedness. My faith is in Jesus Christ." They would say, "That's wonderful. We love you. You're welcome to just come to church and participate but you will not be made a member until we watch you for a year." Do you know why? They were suffering for the faith and they weren't going to put up with a bunch of false professors in their church. They had enough to deal with without having a bunch of problems from people who were just going through the motions. And that helped me when I saw that. I don't believe in setting timetables but I do believe in working with a person until they understand the scriptural truths of conviction of sin, repentance and faith, and they can tell me, "Pastor, based on what the Scripture says, that's what I have experienced. I know God has saved me. I have experienced the new birth."

Well, you've got to guard the front door and, secondly, as I just said, you've got to open the back door. There is not going to be unity in the church until most churches get rid of a lot of people who are on their membership rolls because too often the congregation is a lot bigger than the church. Did you hear me? I mean the true, blood-bought, Spirit-reborn ones are a lot smaller number than those who are on the roll. Of course we try to address that and we are still addressing that many many years ago when we began to remove people from the church roll if they didn't try to even come to church at all.

How important is this? Just listen to this. You don't have to turn there. Our time is getting away. I said we weren't going to be long and I'm going a little bit long. I'm not bad long yet so hang on just a moment, all right? Listen to what Paul says to the Ephesian elders. He's leaving these pastors at Ephesus. He knows he won't see them again and he says in Acts 20, I'll begin in verse, lessee, let me begin in 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." So Paul says, "I was with you and all the other churches I've helped help, preaching with my whole heart and genuinely the Gospel of the grace of God." 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." I gave you all of God's truth, even the part that made you uncomfortable or the part that was difficult to hear. I gave you the whole counsel of God. Then here it is, this practical word that connects with what we're talking about, verse 28 and 29, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers," or pastors, "to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock." He said they are going to come in from outside and try to be a part of you and they are actually savage wolves trying to ruin the unity, trying to ruin the church. Verse 30, "and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them." He said, "I know when I leave Satan is going to see there is a weak spot we had better get in," and he's going to try to bring people into the church, he's going to try to cause people to rise up within their own membership to cause divisions and factions and ruin the church and he tells the pastors, "Be vigilant. Be on the alert. Be on the guard. It's your job to keep this thing unity."

Well, the fourth thing under conclusions for practical application is: guard unity by looking for the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart. Be careful in counseling a person who believes they are converted that you do not give them a false assurance. Look for the Spirit's work because the Spirit's work is identical in every person. I don't mean it's expressed identically by every person but the Spirit does the same thing in every person: he convicts them of sin, he convinces them of Christ, and brings them to faith. We can't understand all that ministry and there is a mystery to it but it happens.

For example, we've got to look for more than just a person that's been awakened. I am convinced, I know for a fact, I've sinned against God as your pastor in years past in bringing people into the church when they were only awakened by the Spirit, not converted by the Spirit. Remember Governor Felix would bring in the Apostle Paul and say, "Tell me about all this stuff," and he would be troubled, he was awakened but he was not converted. There is a big difference between the two.

Be careful that you don't receive someone into the church that is awakened and even convicted of sin because that's not yet true conversion. A person can start to feel the weight of their sin, it may be two seconds, it may be two years, I don't know but that's not yet conversion.

Then there is regeneration in faith which is conversion whereby feeling the weight of their sin, they cast their hope and faith totally on Jesus Christ and they rest on Christ and Christ alone and there is that sweet Gospel humility whereby they are aware there is nothing good in me.

When there are those evidences of regeneration in saving faith, then baptism should occur. I've had people challenge me before to say, "Why do you spend some time before baptism? In the book of Acts it seems like people were converted and baptized." Well, let me say this: if you can reproduce the events of the book of Acts, I'll baptize people more quickly. I mean, when the Holy Spirit is falling like tongues of fire, people are talking languages they don't know, and by the way, for a person in that Jewish context to be immersed in Christian baptism was like me taking you to Tehran, Iran, in the town square and publicly announcing to all of those radical, Islamic, Muslim, dedicated ones that you denounce Mohamed, you denounce the Islamic faith, your faith is in Jesus Christ and being baptized in their public square in front of all of them. And I would say if you want to do that quickly, you are probably saved. Amen? That's what these guys were doing. When they were baptized on Pentecost, in that Jewish context they were taking a radical step against their people, their nation, the church of the day, their doctrine of the day, everything. They were putting their lives, their welfare, their occupations on the line. So you can't reproduce that.

Now sometimes, I believe Jonathan Edwards was right, Jonathan Edwards probably experienced one of the truest long-term evangelist revivals that we've seen in the last several hundred years in the Great Awakening, again, right before our nation became a country when tens of thousands, possibly hundreds of thousands came to church membership under their preaching. And Jonathan Edwards would talk about how every once in a while under a real move of the Spirit, it's easy to discern a true conversion quickly but most of the time it takes a while.

So you can't, you always interpret Scripture in its context and the context of Acts is a radically unique time, a one-for-all time when the Spirit fell at Pentecost never to be repeated. There will not be another Pentecost. I hope we can get some splashings from Pentecost maybe, but there will never be another Pentecost. That was the birthing of the church age and it will never be repeated and in that context, culturally and spiritually what was going on, we just don't have that today. In our present situation, we need usually some time and if it's my children or my grandchildren, I hope the church elders would prayerfully take time with them. We don't want to baptize somebody 3 to 5 times by the time they are 21. Baptism is a sealing ending to that quest of seeking God for your soul and if they are only in awakening, they are only in conviction and they haven't come to regeneration, you don't want to do that yet. You can cause them to stop seeking the Lord. So look for the true work of conversion wrought by the Spirit, not things short of true conversion.

Well, this will be the last thing I'll say. All sins against the unity that God has wrought in this church are sins against the Holy Spirit. All sins against the unity of the church are an

attempt to sever what God has brought together. Now think about that. It's an attempt to sever what God has brought together. Now, as your preaching pastor and I've been here with you 37 or so years, I'm so in love with you and thankful to God for you because I see clearly this kind of unity in the church. But brothers and sisters, we must vow to fight for it and never let our guard down. Somebody gets out of line, it's okay, I can get out of line, but we ought to see them get back in line, amen, and humble themselves and say, "I'm on the team, brother. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have acted that way." And that happens once a month or so we see that, but we always see that sweet repentant spirit and getting back on the team and going forward for God's glory. The nature and the ground of this special, God-wrought, unique unity he has given a local church.