

# Gospel Principles for God's People: Gospel Unity – Romans 15:5-6

CBC Ilderton

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On rare occasions, I take the opportunity to lead a worship team on Sunday mornings. As our team assembles to practice, we all start the same way – making sure we are in tune. Some people have incredible ears – they can tell if one of the guitar strings is even slightly off. And as we tune our instruments, there is something amazing when the different parts come together.

The piano provides the melody, giving a strong cue to those who are singing. The acoustic guitar adds a sense of rhythm. The bass or cello fills out the bottom of the scale, adding a depth to the song. The drums keep the beat while adding the feeling of drama. A violin gives the feeling of the soaring nature of the music.

When musicians come together to play a piece, each with their own unique instrument and tuned together, there is something glorious. But when each person does their own thing, it sounds like the orchestra warming up – a large cacophony that has no discernable pattern, rhythm, or movement.

God has made us as humans to long for unity. We desire to work together because we know that we are stronger together than we are as individuals. Throughout our Covidian exile, we heard and saw the phrase “We are all in this together” repeated.

But there are many obstacles to unity. Western civilization is at a tipping point – will we actually pull together, or will we tear apart? Can we get everyone to agree about how to handle covid-19? What about systemic racism? How will we get people back to work and improve our economy? To every question, there are many answers. And people can be very dogmatic. And suddenly, we find that we are all in this together, but we're not together in how we're in this.

Paul saw this problem in Rome. How could a church with such racial diversity pull together? How would this church handle their personal preferences and religious practices when they came together? Would the vegetarians and the meat-eaters get along, or would they devour one another?

In a doctrinally dense book, Paul spends a 10<sup>th</sup> of his time working out practical details about what it means to have unity as the people of God. And for good reason – Paul knows that the unity of the church is necessary for the success of the spread of the good news about Jesus. If Christ came to reconcile sinners to God, then can't sinners reconcile with one another? So at the end of a discussion about gospel principles and practices, Paul offers a few words in Romans 15:5-6 that remind us that we ought to...

## **Pray for Unity**

This is Paul's prayer: “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another....” As Paul prays, he recognizes that unity is a gift of God. Unity is a divine gift because unity requires supernatural strength – to

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love one another in the midst of differences. And loving one another means that there are two parts of unity: the first is inward, and the second is outward.

First, the inward unity is to live in harmony – or more literally to have the same mind. What does it mean to be likeminded? As we saw in Romans 14, Paul does not tell them to have the same mind on what day is most holy, what foods are not to be eaten, nor to think the same way about disputable matters. Rather, Paul tells them to prioritize the same things, and he reinforces gospel priorities with a little statement: “In accord with Christ Jesus” (v. 5). He wants them to keep the main thing the main thing. This is Paul’s consistent practice – he doesn’t call for likemindedness apart from Christ Jesus. In Philippians 2:2, he tells the church to have the same mind that is theirs in Christ Jesus. In other words, prioritize Christ and his gospel.

The problem people find is that they want uniformity, not unity. In our modern culture, if you disagree with me, you hate me. If you hold a differing opinion that challenges me, I have the right to despise you. I reject you. I alienate you.

But Paul’s commitment is to a larger priority than group-think. He wants the church to be a place where we love one another in the midst of our differences. We can have our differing opinions about whether we should have two services or one. We can have differing opinions when we should reintroduce youth and children’s ministries. But we do have to love and respect one another in our differences of opinion.

Inward unity begins with my heart attitude towards my brother and sister. Having the same mind means that I want to love my brother or sister in Christ and outdo them in the love that they have shown – this was Paul’s point when he used this language of living in harmony or having the same mind in Rom. 12:16. I want to love radically because of how God has been towards me – he has persevered with me in my sins and failures, he has encouraged my heart to walk in love because he first loved me, and he has shown that I can have the hope of like-mindedness with my brothers and sisters in the Scriptures. So we pray for unity to begin in our hearts.

As we pray, we also seek to tune our hearts to the Lord. Just like all of the instruments of a band or orchestra tune to the same note, so we tune ourselves to the same message of hope – the Scriptures. Paul tells us that our encouragement and perseverance to be more and more likeminded comes from God who has revealed himself in his Word (See vv. 4-5). As I come to know God and look to his Word, I will grow inwardly to think more like him and be like him. His Word is the note to which I tune my life.

As I tune my life to God and his Word, I find that there is a second form of unity that comes – an outward unity: “that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 6).

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This outward unity is displayed by a common devotion to the Lord. Our commitment to Christ means that we are pulling together. And one way we see this unity is by our desire to sing together. One reflection of a Christian heart growing in unity is a desire to be with Christians, to sing together, and to encourage one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. When our hearts are not tuned to God, one way it shows up is by not wanting to sing. Even if we're not great as a singer, the Christian heart that is tuned to God wants to praise him in song.

And finally, our devotion to the Lord will unite us in our service of his mission. We recognize that we all have different gifts, abilities, and opportunities to serve. As we have shared that we are reopening, I have been so thankful for how various people have reached out to say that they are able to serve however is needed during this time! While we don't always know how we can use your gifts, I know that we can continue to grow together to tell others of the reconciling work of Christ who unites repentant sinners to God and humble saints to one another!

While we pray for unity of mind and voice, we remember that unity is not the goal. Unity is for a greater purpose – that we...

## **Prize God's Glory**

To have an inward and outward unity is good. But it is not ultimate. What is ultimate is that "we glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

When Christians make unity the goal, what they find is that trouble ensues. They aren't able to be united. And there is a simple reason for this: the goal isn't church unity, but God's glory.

What often happens in families and churches is that the goal has been forgotten. Unity can become a weapon that is used rather than a gift that is received. "We've got to be on the same page!" can become a call to uniformity. Questions and differing opinions become threats to "church unity".

But God is glorified not by division but when we, with all of our diversity, stand together and praise him. We recognize that when we are pulling apart as Christians, we will sound more like an orchestra that is out of tune and playing different pieces. But when we see that the Lord has given us the musical score to play (his Word) so that we might know and enjoy him, then suddenly differences on secondary matters are kept in perspective. Your differences of opinion about when Sunday school should resume is not a threat to me – it helps me to think more biblically, more compassionately towards you.

And our two services are not pulling us apart as a church, but seeking to pull together. So though we're not all in the same room at the same time, our common devotion to the Lord and our common commitment to Christ's mission mean that we have more that unite us than divide us.

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God's aim in creation and redemption is to display the glory of his kindness in mercy. And when we, as a church, keep our eye on the musical score and aim to play together with our different instruments and different parts, we find that we are not pulling apart, but together we are all contributing to the soaring music as a unified, beautiful arrangement to the glory of the One who has so dearly loved us and made us. Because one day, our desire to be one will be realized when Christ returns to be united to his bride and his bride to him, and display that the unity of our Triune God will be reflected in our union with the Son as the one people of God forever.