

## **The Power of Unity**

*How good and how pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!* (Ps. 133:1).

The Scriptures tell us that a people acting in unity is an incredibly powerful force. The Israelites demonstrated their resolve in a time of national crisis when *(A)ll the Israelites from Dan to Beersheba and from the land of Gilead came out as one man and assembled before the Lord in Mizpah* (Judges 20:1). In another case, it was a world united in rebellion that provoked God's judgment at Babel, scattering the people through the confusion of languages. A people united in purpose can accomplish great good – or evil.

A single stream at the source of a watershed up in the mountains is hardly an intimidating force, even when swelled by a storm. But the same stream, united with hundreds of others, becomes a formidable power. Harper's Ferry, where the Shenandoah and the Potomac merge, is such a place. So it is with spiritual unity, solitary streams multiply their resources to form a river.

### **How is unity established?**

The Psalm quoted above shows that unity is both beautiful and powerful. It is there the Lord *bestows the blessing, even life forevermore* (Ps. 133:3). Spiritual unity is established when we focus our efforts on the common good, rather than simply our own personal benefit. It is established when we make unity a priority. *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace* (Eph. 4:3). It is established when we recognize the difference between what is essential, and what is not. *Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.* (Eph. 4:2). Unity in a marriage releases tremendous spiritual power, its lack creates hindrances to communion with God. *Husbands, in the same way, be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers* (I Peter 3:7).

### **How is unity hindered or destroyed?**

Sometimes people mistake “going along to get along” and “not rocking the boat” with unity of spirit. But conflict avoidance does not establish the dynamic of commitment, or the joy of serving a greater purpose which true unity brings. Rather, it establishes a kind of lukewarm, peaceful co-existence, a half-hearted resignation. Dynamic unity requires enthusiastic engagement that avoidance of difficult issues can never produce. God calls us to speak the truth in love, and to be sincere in our relationships with one another. *Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth* (I Cor. 5:8). This kind of sincerity only flourishes where there are honest, trusting relationships built over time. The trust accompanying this kind of unity is earned by a track record of *trustworthy* behavior.

I am not advocating pettiness here. The opposite extreme of conflict avoidance is fault-finding and petty bickering. This also destroys unity, as well as the credibility of the ones who engage in it. The ability to recognize what is important, and what is a sideshow, is a mark of maturity in a family, a congregation, or an office. Someone once said, “You can tell how big a person is by the size of the thing it takes to make him angry.” *And do not grieve the Holy Spirit with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage, and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you* (Eph. 4:30-32).

One of the surest hindrances to unity is the inability to be a team-player. Dean Smith, renowned basketball coach of the University of North Carolina writes, “One of the first things I did at the beginning of preseason practice was to spell out for our players the importance of team play. Basketball is a game that counts on togetherness. I pointed out that seldom, if ever, did the nation’s leading scorer play on a ranked team . . . One man who failed to do his job unselfishly could undermine the efforts of the four other players on the court.”(Dean Smith, *The Caroline Way*, NY: Penguin Press, 2004, p. 30).

The Lord Jesus said it this way, *Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many* (Matt. 20:26-28).

### **What can we do?**

So if unity is so great, how do we get it? Committed relationships and consistent behavior; speaking the truth in love; avoidance of petty bickering; patience with irritants; and finally, corporate prayer which is both a creator and a result of unity. Jesus said, *Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven* (Matt. 18:19). The Greek word for agree is *sumphoneo* from which we get our word symphony. Jesus here describes an agreement or unity of spirit, which amounts to a harmony of heart and purpose; a picture of real unity which releases the power of heaven.

The anointing, creativity, and power of God are released in God-given unity. *It is like the precious oil poured on the head, running down . . . for there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore* (Ps. 133:2,3).