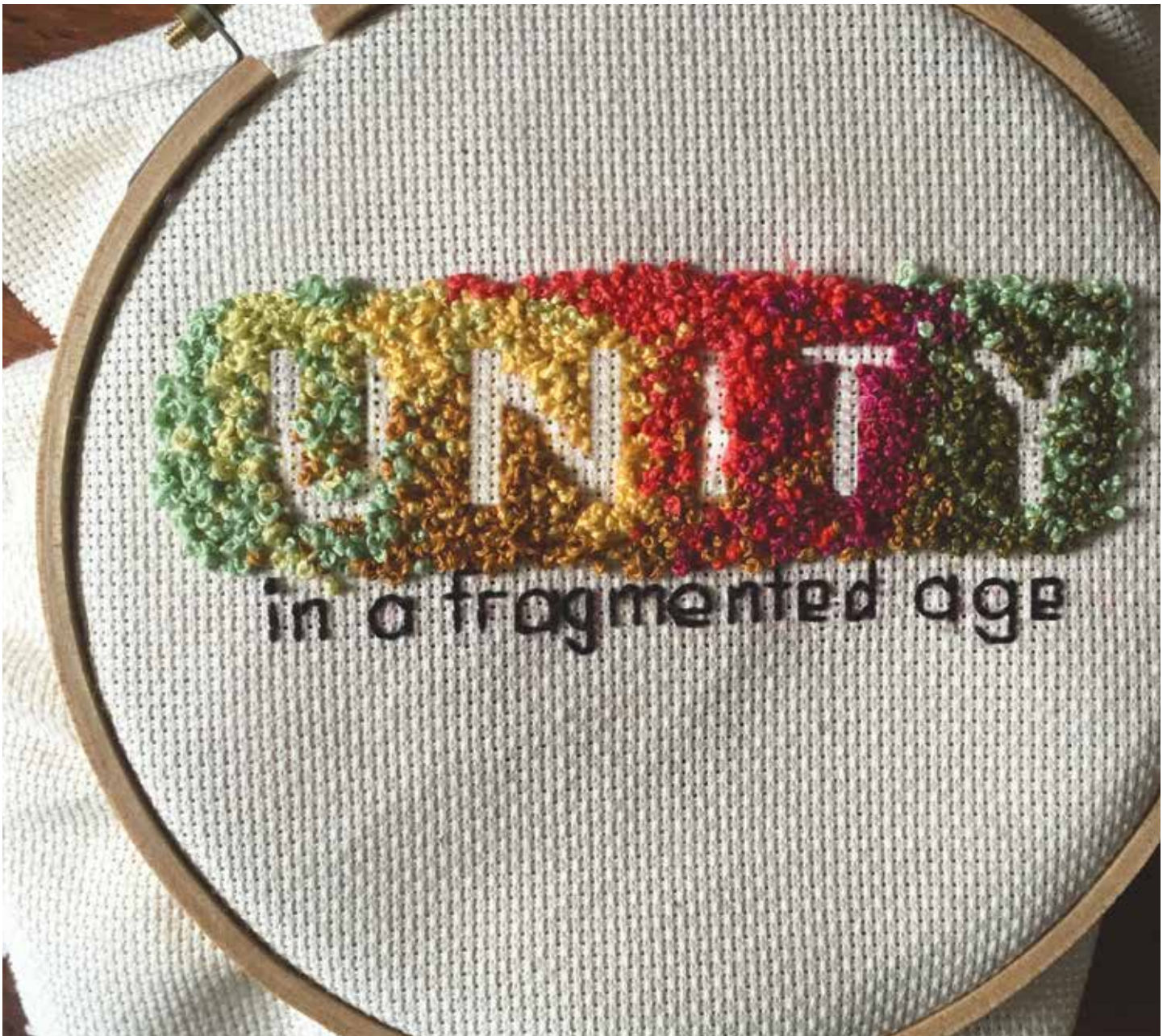


Western

MAGAZINE



SPRING 2017 | UNITY IN A FRAGMENTED AGE

UNITY IN A FRAGMENTED AGE

We are obviously living in a season when diverse opinions about a variety of topics (politics, theology, social norms, etc.) are even more polarizing than normal. The tension that results from differing convictions about various societal and cultural issues can easily bleed both into the church and into families, straining relationships in both settings.

A classic illustration can be found in the pages of church history. Samuel and Susanna Wesley, parents of John and Charles, found themselves in passionate disagreement about who was the rightful king (an early 18th century English version of, “Not my president,” if you will). Susanna supported King James (who had been overthrown), while Samuel was an advocate of his successor, King William. During joint prayer, whenever Samuel included a petition seeking God’s blessing upon William, Susanna deliberately refused to add her “amen.” Eventually the tension reached the point where Samuel declared to her, “We must part, for if we have two kings, we must have two beds.” After many months, and the death of William, Samuel returned home, reconciled with his wife, and resumed normal marital intimacy. Out of that reconciliation, John Wesley was conceived. So, from a human perspective, apart from that reconciliation there would have been no John Wesley.

The biblical gospel, however, is designed and empowered by God to create a community that is unified around shared core spiritual commitments that transcend individual convictions about lesser matters. “Lesser” doesn’t necessarily mean unimportant, but rather not as important. That community, the Body of Christ, is intended to bring together significantly different types of people who typically would struggle to live together in a fallen world (e.g., Gal. 3:28). In a sense, we have the opportunity to model to a fragmented world what “diversity in unity” can (and should) look like, and that fundamental unity is one of the most appealing dimensions of Christianity. It should attract others to the gospel of Christ by offering to them a loving, supportive community living under the Lordship of a gracious Savior.

But if we lose sight of that gospel commonality, or fail to practice the various behaviors and values that preserve the Spirit-created unity, then we diminish that appeal and experience unnecessary divisiveness in the church. That is why we have chosen to address in this issue the theme of gospel unity in a fragmented age.

We will do so from a variety of angles. We begin with a model from Gerry Breshears that helps us discern whether a particular issue merits dying, dividing, debating or merely deciding. Jeff Louie then illustrates how key gospel themes should guide our response to some of the key issues that create tensions among believers today. Ron Marrs follows by giving a case study of how his congregation has intentionally sought to live out more faithfully Paul’s command in Eph. 4:3 to preserve the unity of the Spirit. Eric Moore offers a city-wide case study, describing how Detroit evangelicals worked together to demonstrate the gospel’s power to overcome racial tension. Finally, Kate Zahradka shares some thoughts on how the growing popularity of social media affects both how we communicate with and view others; James’ warning about an untamed tongue is even more needed in a digital age when words can immediately travel around the world and exist in a nearly eternal archive. We have also included some recommended resources for those of you who desire to explore further this important topic.

The importance our Lord places upon His people living together in unified and attractive community is demonstrated by the frequent attention He gives to that topic in His Word. He commands it, Jesus prayed (and died) for it, and His Spirit enables it. This is yet another dimension of life where the biblical gospel, received and lived out in faith, can uniquely transform us both individually and corporately. So we encourage you to join us in a fresh recommitment to a principled pursuit of evangelical ecumenism, marked by strategic collaboration, sympathetic congeniality, and sensible convictionism.



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RECOMMENDED RESOURCES



AND LEVELS OF CERTAINTY

By Dr. Gerry Breshears

Wise Christians know that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. They have a nose for significance and create a climate of unity around central issues while moderating and directing discussion over secondary issues. They see how seemingly insignificant matters may undercut the central points of the gospel, even though they may appear benign, cultured, or loving. Wise Christians understand that some issues, which may seem fundamental, are actually seeds of division planted by the enemy of our souls.

Mature churches understand Paul's admonition to "Avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless" (Titus 3:9) but also know to "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him" (Titus 3:10).

How can we discern which battles to fight? Is there a way to differentiate between wolves in sheep's clothing and sheep in wolves' clothing?

In navigating divisive issues, I have found it most helpful to distinguish levels of certainty. Then I can differentiate what is essential from that which is merely controversial. For me, this breaks down into four levels: First are things I would “die for.” To deny them knowingly would demonstrate that you are outside the boundaries of gospel orthodoxy and perhaps not in living relationship with Jesus. Second are things I would “divide for.” We are Christians, fellow members of the body of Christ, but we won’t be in the same local fellowship. Third are things I would “debate for.” Here, we are in the same church but we will wrestle (sometimes heatedly) with these issues. Fourth are things we “decide for.” These issues contribute to the rich diversity in the life of our church.

Let’s discuss each in turn.

DIE FOR

This category contains the foundations of the faith once delivered to the saints for which we contend earnestly (Jude 3). If necessary, the truth of the gospel incorporated in these propositions are things for which we would give up our life. They include the inspiration and authority of Scripture, the Trinity, and the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity as the God-man, Jesus, including his virgin birth, sinless life, substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection and personal return. Also included is justification and regeneration by grace alone through faith alone which is lived out in gospel centered good works (Eph. 2:8-10; Tit. 2:11-13; 3:3-8), the Spirit’s personal indwelling believers constituting the one body of Christ, and the final judgment leading to hell and heaven.

Calling a person who knowingly denies essentials of the faith a brother or sister in Christ for the sake of “unity” truly denies the unity founded on the truth of Jesus Christ. We see a growing progressive wing that calls for humility and broadening the definition of gospel orthodoxy to include universalism. Humility concerning such items can never be a virtue. Some truths are worth dying for.

DIVIDE FOR

Everyone who affirms the essentials in word and life is a fellow member of Christ’s body, one whom we call brother or sister in Christ. However, other important issues are so

foundational to our life with God that we will divide fellowship over them. In ancient times it led to the division between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:39). In modern times, these are the foundations of the denominational differences.

Arminians will divide from Reformed over the extent of God’s sovereignty and election. Both may divide from Pentecostals over the nature and timing of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Is baptism the sign and seal of membership in the covenant community appropriate for infant children of believers? Or is it a sign of personal confession of Jesus

as Lord appropriate only for believers? Should the mission of the church include promoting justice in society as a major ministry focus along with winning the lost and worshiping God? Separate churches will form depending on whether women can be elders or pastors and if the Sunday morning church service should be liturgical, expositional, or celebrative.

It seems to me that such divisions may be legitimate so long as the overall unity of the body is affirmed and

the dividing points are truly central issues.

These divisions become problematic when the dividing walls are so high that there is little contact between different groups, when we devote blogs to what is wrong with the other group, or when arguments between the groups drain significant energy from our worship of God, building godliness or proclaiming the gospel.

When we recognize that these are “divide for,” not “die for” issues, we can pray for each other and cooperate in issues of Christian life, justice ministry, and evangelism.

In recent years, we have reduced the number of issues in the “divide for” category. Often this is because there is an attempt to look for unifying points and see the differences within that light. When churches emphasize the power of the Spirit’s work and the fullness of the gifts, the evidentiary significance of speaking in tongues that used to divide Pentecostals and Charismatics is much less significant. As we affirm strongly the centrality of Scripture, fewer will divide over the question of whether God speaks today only through Scripture, or if He also speaks through prophetic revelation.

Everyone who affirms the essentials
in word and life is a fellow member
of Christ’s body, one whom we call
brother or sister in Christ.

When the unifying truth of a whole-person spirituality (including mind, will, emotions, body and spirit) is emphasized, churches balance careful teaching of the Word and the expectation of a gospel-centered, heart-level obedience.

Jesus calls us to unity and so we should pursue gospel ecumenism, a spiritual unity that still respects these important differences. This kind of ecumenism promotes true understanding between groups, instead of caricatures of the other groups. It speaks first and primarily of our unity in Christ and addresses others as fellow believers.

DEBATE FOR

We wrestle with these issues inside a church or denomination. The wrestling may be prolonged or painful, but we do it while maintaining regular fellowship, joining in worship and service. Debated issues may include the leadership roles appropriate for women, the extent of involvement the church should have in compassionate ministries in the community, the age of the earth, or which musical and preaching styles are best in a worship service.

It seems to me that we must keep “debate fors” from escalating into “divide fors.” The best leaders keep the unity of the body at the center of our thinking as Paul admonishes us in Ephesians 4:3. These leaders are also able keep the focus on the essentials even when the wrestling is strenuous.

I find that when churches try to maintain unity by silencing the debates or smoothing things over with “nice” words, divisive folk are often empowered. The divisive people continue to promote their wrangling without being called to responsibility by the wisdom of the group.

The ground rules of Acts 15 seem appropriate in resolving these issues in congregations. Paul took the divisive people back to their body in


In my judgment, the discernment revolves around the centrality and clarity the issue takes in Scripture and the significance of the issue for our faith.

Jerusalem, where everyone spoke for themselves before the whole church. They spoke what they believed and to the issue at hand rather than to the errors of the other group and to irrelevant issues. The whole congregation listened and recognized the wisdom of James as he stood for essentials (justification by faith alone apart from observance of the Mosaic Law) and proposed compromise on secondary issues. They led the group in wise decision-making, rather than making decrees and enforcing decisions by weight of authority. The size of the group of people involved would vary depending on the significance of the debated issue.

DECIDE FOR

These are the kinds of issues addressed in Romans 14-15, the areas of belief and behavior about which there is no law. This is where acceptance is a virtue and legalism a real danger, especially as divisive people latch onto lower-level issues, raising them into foolish controversies (1 Tim. 1:4; 6:4-5; 2 Tim. 2:14-16, 23-26; Tit. 3:9-10).

Paul instructs us to stop judging one another over such issues, to stop holding others in contempt because they differ here. Rather, he directs us to accept each other, urging us, “Let us therefore make every effort to do



what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Rom. 14:19).

Note well, this accepting attitude applies only in the non-essentials. Difference in essential matters like what is required for becoming a true Christian “brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them” (Acts 15:2).

CONCLUSION

How do you discern the differences between these levels of certainty? In my judgment, the discernment revolves around the centrality and clarity the issue takes in Scripture and the significance of the issue for our faith.

Jesus as God incarnate in full humanity, who lived a sinless life, is a “die for.” Scripture is clear that Jesus did not sin. Those who affirm that He sinned in order to establish His full humanity may appear sensitive to human problems, yet, they exclude themselves from gospel orthodoxy when they do.

What did Jesus mean when He cried out, “It is finished” (Jn. 19:30) and died? Did He mean He finished the work of propitiating the wrath of God toward elect sinners whom God chose based on His sovereign purposes alone (definite atonement in Calvinism)? Or did He mean He had finished the arduous work of atonement to provide payment for the penalty of sin for all who would receive Him, whom God chose based on His perfect foreknowledge of their choice from all eternity (universal atonement in Arminianism)? These sorts of questions that have to do with different ways of connecting scriptural affirmations are often “divide for” issues.

While some believe that Jesus did not have sinful desires, noting that Jesus was “a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners” (Heb. 7:26), others see “made like his brothers in every respect, so that he

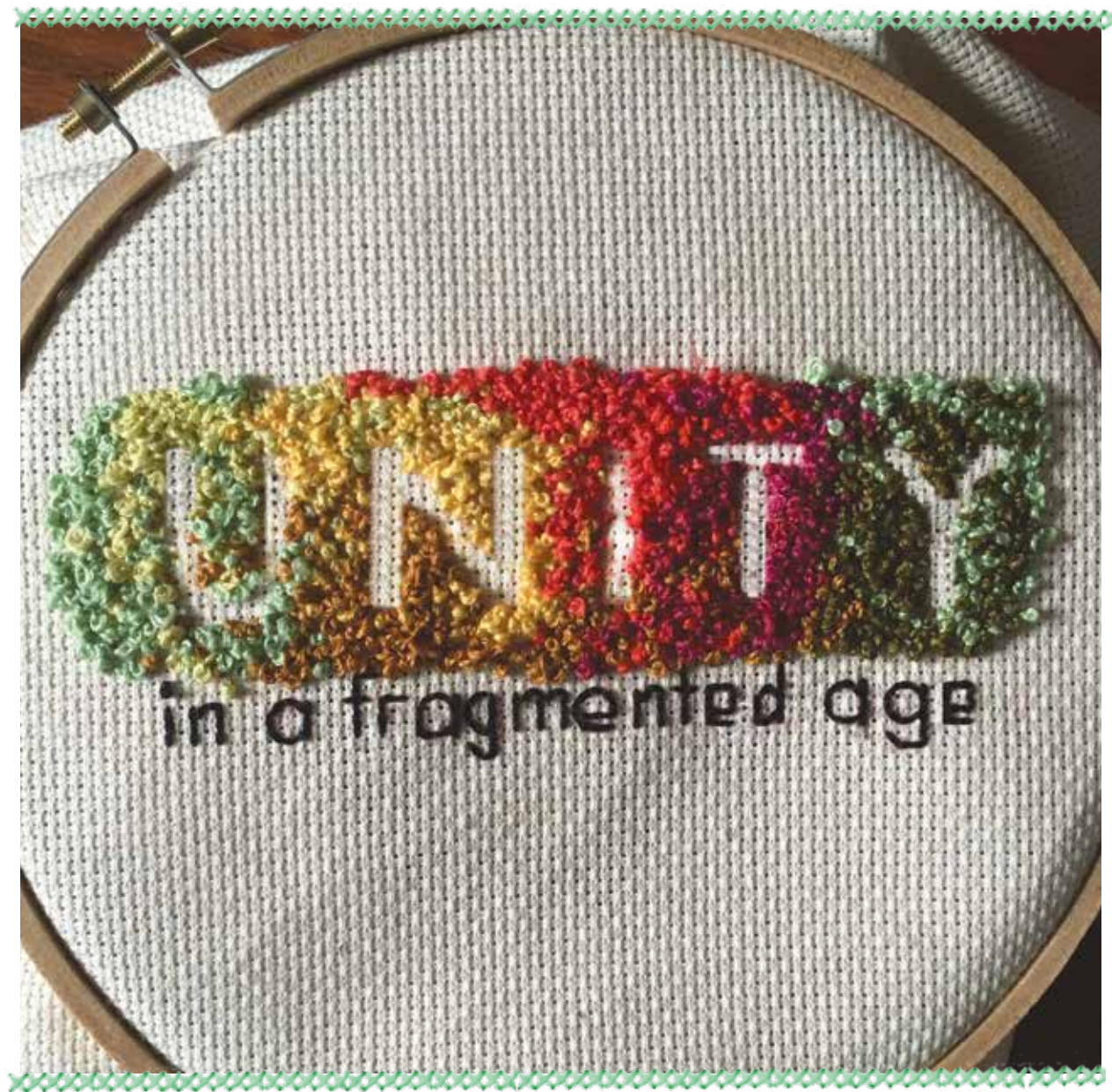
might become a merciful and faithful high priest” (Heb. 2:17), indicating that He must have wrestled with sinful desires. We would “debate for” this difference, but I would not divide over it though it relates to the bigger question of the balance of Jesus’ divinity and humanity.

Did Jesus know the answer when He asked the people “Where have you laid him?” (Jn. 11:34) is an issue that comes from the question of whether Jesus limited the use of His divine omniscience to human levels or emptied Himself of its use and relied on the Holy Spirit to give Him knowledge necessary for His messianic mission. It is usually a “decide for” question though it gains significance when we ask if we can be like Jesus.

As we comprehend these levels of certainty and begin to employ them as a community of believers, we can avoid the trap of being unnecessarily divisive on one hand and compromising the faith on the other. As we emphasize the essentials, we are less likely to fall for the cultural accommodations of Christianity that lead to liberalism. That also helps us keep secondary issues in perspective and avoid the divisions they create.



Gerry Breshears is Professor of Theology at Western Seminary, where he has taught for thirty-seven years. He is an elder at Grace Community Church in Gresham, OR and has authored numerous books including “Vintage Jesus” and “Doctrine: What Every Christian Should Believe.”



By Dr. Jeff Louie

“Democrats vs. Republicans,” “Establishment Politicians vs. Millennial Idealists,” “The President vs. The Media,” “Urban Progressive Coasts vs. Rural Fly-Over States,” “Law Enforcement vs. Inner City Minorities,” “Globalists vs. Nationalists,” “Green vs. Pragmatists,” “Wall Builders vs. Immigration Advocates.” The fissures are many, they are heated, and they cause discord and division.

As believers in Christ and His gospel, how are we to respond? Do we lead movements that further fracture? Stay in our bunkers and lay low? Become depressed? Or do we see it as an opportunity for Christ in America? I believe that we should advance the last option. We can do this by allowing the gospel take its transformational course in the lives of believers and the Church, demonstrating unity that transcends race, politics, and all other dividing lines.

We often understand the gospel as a set of historical facts or creeds to hold as true, or a confession of faith that saves us. These are important aspects of the gospel, but there is much more. The gospel is multifaceted. The center is Christ, the tone is grace, the end is an eternity with God. The way to the benefits is justification by faith alone. The empowerment is by the Holy Spirit. The critical events are the crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and return of our Lord. The gospel also unites us with Christ and regenerates us to a newness of life, for God’s intention is for the gospel to take root in our lives and to begin to change us.

Below, we will look at three common areas where believers can help—or hinder—Christian unity: navigating racial and socio-economic divides, biblically prescribed Christian charity, and the thoughtful stewardship of money. While these are not the only ways we can practice unity, they are certainly ways we all encounter.

NAVIGATING RACIAL AND ETHNIC DIVIDES

This unity with Christ can be understood broadly as describing our relationship with Jesus. More narrowly, however, this union can be seen as a part of the sequence in logically understanding salvation. It is central in understanding how God worked to get us where we need to be through faith. But our union in Christ is more than a personal standing and relationship with God. Look at what Paul writes: “*Here there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and in all*” (Colossians 3:11).

The marching orders of Christ in the Great Commission are to make disciples of all nations. We are to be involved in world evangelization and support missionaries abroad, with the intention of leading people to Christ. Unfortunately, we often evangelize people without seeing how it must affect the makeup of our churches, and our attitude toward those who are different than us. We have churches who support world missions, yet the same congregations do not seek

diversity racially or economically. American churches often reflect the same fractures in American society. This is not what the early church was about—in the early Church, we see the gospel break down walls. The reason is simple: in Christ we are an equal, diverse, and united family. Our union in Christ not only saves us and allows us to have fellowship with God, but it is the spiritual basis for Christians to break racial and economic divides. We need to have this truth sink into our hearts and have our church communities marked by this unity so that we might be a positive influence in American society.

REFLECTING CHRIST THROUGH CHRISTIAN CHARITY

Biblical truth is important to Christians. We write books about God. We have Bible colleges and seminaries to gain greater understanding. American Christians often choose to attend a certain church because of the strength of its pulpit. Truth is important, but truth is more than informational—it should be transformational. James writes:

“But be sure you live out the message and do not merely listen to it and so deceive yourselves. For if someone merely listens to the message and does not live it out, he is like someone who gazes at his own face in a mirror. For he gazes at himself and then goes out and immediately forgets what sort of person he was...Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their misfortune and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:22-24, 27).

James reminds us that there is a connection between truth and living. If we deny this link, we deceive ourselves. Truth’s end is life transformation. There is more than a mere link between truth and life change. James describes the purified form of transformation as caring for orphans and widows in distress. Part of Christian maturity is found in how we deal with those who suffer misfortune. Oftentimes we describe discipleship as learning the spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and studying scripture, or in church involvement through the utilization of our spiritual giftedness. These are good and needed in our path of growing in Christlikeness, but out of these disciplines a love for the helpless—especially those in our local church body—must flow. This is a major marker that we are on the right path in our journey with Christ.

If we are sensitive, we will see those in need all around us. Some cities are being gentrified while others are in the midst of urban decay. There are wealthy immigrants entering our nation for investment and high-end employment, but there are others who are refugees are seeking a safe haven. Victims of violence and abuse are our neighbors. What a testimony we would have for Christ if, as the body of Christ, we let the gospel that saved us eternally take its course to help the helpless around us.

THOUGHTFUL STEWARDSHIP OF MONEY

The gospel should transform every aspect of our lives, yet many believers find surrendering their finances to the Lord to be difficult. Most of us in America are familiar with the phrases “money talks” and “put your money where your mouth is.” Biblically, we are taught that where our treasure is, there our heart will be also (Matt. 6:21). In light of this, we ought to look for opportunities where we might use our financial resources to promote the unity within our local congregations and as testament to our love for others.

“Command those who are rich in this world’s goods not to be haughty or to set their hope on riches, which are uncertain, but on God who richly provides us with all things for our enjoyment. Tell them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, to be generous givers, sharing with others. In this way they will save up a treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the future and so lay hold of what is truly life” (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

The rich are getting wealthier here. The middle class is shrinking and the rural and urban poor are increasing in number. As believers how can we respond? By looking at the above passage, Paul sets forth a change in behavior among the rich that is set with the backdrop of the eternal inheritance of the gospel. For the follower of Christ, wealth is not a sign of success, but a stewardship to be used. In Christ, money has limited value if it is not used for eternal purposes. Paul is clear. We are to be generous with our wealth, and generous in our good deeds. Imagine if Christians focused on investing and using our wealth for the good of the gospel and the common good of society. Imagine if believers were less greedy, if we were a people who did not have money as our idol, if we did good, how much would society benefit? How much would our God be honored?

LET THE PEACE OF CHRIST GIVE US HOPE

The three changes that I have mentioned—breaking the racial and socio-economic divide, practicing compassion and the stewardship of money—are actions based upon the hope and blessing we have through Christ. We must see change not as a mere moral activity, but a transformation that mirrors the salvation each believer has personally received. As Christians, we are all going through that same transformation which is the basis for unity within the Church.

The systems of this world are fallen, imperfect, and corrupt, but we are to do good, transforming our attitudes and actions to individuals and people groups in this world. We cannot solve all of the problems in America. I hold, though, that the transformed lives of believers in America can go a long way to help diffuse the tension we are now experiencing. At times, our actions can translate into a common good for society and, as the Apostle Paul says, we will pray for our leaders and the peace of this world.

Though we may see the conditions of our lives and society crumble before us, that is not the hope of the gospel. We must be reminded that we live in a world where rust and moth will destroy. Our ultimate hope is cemented in eternity through the atoning work of Christ. Our Lord has conquered death, reigns on high, and will return to complete redemption. Based upon this certainty, we manifest an extraordinary graciousness to all people around us.



Jeff Louie is Associate Professor of Theology at Western Seminary’s San Jose campus. Jeff is committed to the gospel and is a founding council member of The Gospel Coalition. He serves as an elder at Spectrum Church in Milpitas, CA.



STRENGTHENING THE BODY

***HOW HINSON BAPTIST
CHURCH BUILDS UNITY IN THEIR
CONGREGATION***

By Dr. Ron Marrs



“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

A recent focus on unity in our preaching series at Hinson Baptist Church is just one example of the attempts on the part of the leadership and the congregation to live out the admonition of Ephesians 4:3.

While the church leadership chose to draw special attention to the topic of unity through the preaching series this past winter, efforts to live out Ephesians 4:3 were initiated by the pastors and elders from the start of Pastor Michael Lawrence’s tenure at Hinson. Along with his pastoral colleagues, Geoff Chang and Daniel Schreiner, Pastor Michael has carefully crafted a church culture which has been embraced by the congregation. The following practices are, I believe, a significant factor in the gospel-centered unity found in this body of believers.

INTERGENERATIONAL WORSHIP SERVICE

We have chosen to create a worship service that unites the generations. We are very aware that this is not an easy task in light of different musical tastes and preferences, but our goal is to worship the Lord with one voice, focusing on the truths expressed in the songs of worship. Pastor Michael had to speak directly to the issue in the early days of his ministry by pointing out that one song might be very pleasing to one attendee while not being a favorite of another. This is where the congregation can practice giving preference to one another. Singing with one voice also demands that the congregation be heard during the worship singing, so our musicians and sound technicians work hard at keeping the volume levels such that this is possible. There are many moments when my heart fills with joy at the sound of the congregation singing loudly and beautifully the praises of God.

This intergenerational service also finds its unity around the preaching of the Word in an expository manner. The unity of the body is promoted as we share in listening to and putting into practice the Word of God.

SUNDAY NIGHT PRAYER MEETING

We gather for a time of prayer together on Sunday evenings for one hour. The format is simple: fifteen minutes of singing in worship; thirty minutes of prayer that consists of reporting, requests, and prayer; and a fifteen-minute sermon. The reporting, request, and prayer time focuses on the biblically dictated priorities around which our unity is to be centered: evangelism, discipleship, global worker updates, and application of the morning sermon.

The sermon on Sunday evening is based on one verse in the opposite Testament of the Sunday morning text. The emphasis is on application of God’s Word.

I am convinced that this more intimate time is a critical component to our church life and is essential for promoting the unity of the church around the gospel.

ELDER UNITY

There are two practices of the elders during their bimonthly meetings that contribute to unity in the congregation. The first is the practice of personal sharing, which occurs at the beginning of each meeting, the second is prayer for the congregation.

During the first thirty minutes of the meeting, the elders share what is going on in their lives. All but one previously selected elder give a one-minute update on their lives to provide points of prayer for the other elders during the week. The previously selected elder spends ten minutes updating the rest of the elders on their work, marriage, family, and anything going on in his life. The other elders ask questions for five minutes and then they pray for this elder.

I will admit that when Pastor Michael proposed this to me during my time as chairman of the elders, I was skeptical. I doubted that men would be willing to share much personal information, but I was wrong. The authenticity modeled by the pastors paved the way for the deep sharing of our lives. I am convinced that this practice contributes to the unity of the church because the work of the church, which ensues in the meeting, comes from a love for one another. This sharing makes the elder meeting far more than a business meeting.

The second practice of the elders is prayer for the congregation: for the next thirty minutes of the meeting, the elders open up the church membership directory and pray for the congregation by name. Prayer is based on the reading of the Scripture which will be the text for the sermon on the following Sunday. This commitment to prayer for the congregation in a remarkably personal way models for the congregation how they ought to be in prayer for each other.

CHURCH MEMBERS IN PRAYER FOR EACH OTHER

As modeled by the elders, the congregation is encouraged to pray through the membership directory by praying for the members listed on the page that corresponds to the day of



the month on which they are praying. The directory includes pictures and is published every time new members are added to the congregation. This has been a great way to get to know the other members while focused on the important, unifying task of prayer.

FELLOWSHIP LUNCHES

We have instituted a monthly fellowship lunch after the morning worship service. We rotate between a potluck style and a prepared meal style. The purpose of this lunch is to enjoy a meal together, hear a testimony from one to two members of the church, and pray together. This has provided a wonderful intergenerational gathering that provides built-in fellowship opportunities.

OPEN FORUMS

A critical component of church life that contributes to unity is good communication. We have found that the establishment of open forums has been vital to creating good communication between the church leadership and the congregation. Open forums have been conducted for changes to the statement of faith, the statement of practices, and during the budget process. There have been issues brought to the elders that have the potential to produce major division in the church. When deemed critical, the elders present these issues to the congregation in an open forum, which allows them to hear from the members of the church and explain their perspective on the situation.

CONGREGATIONAL MEETINGS

The final practice of our church for the promotion of unity will probably elicit some feelings of disbelief: congregational meetings! Aren't these meetings the scenes of boredom and division?

I AM CONVINCED THAT THIS MORE INTIMATE TIME IS A CRITICAL COMPONENT TO OUR CHURCH LIFE AND IS ESSENTIAL FOR PROMOTING THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH AROUND THE GOSPEL.

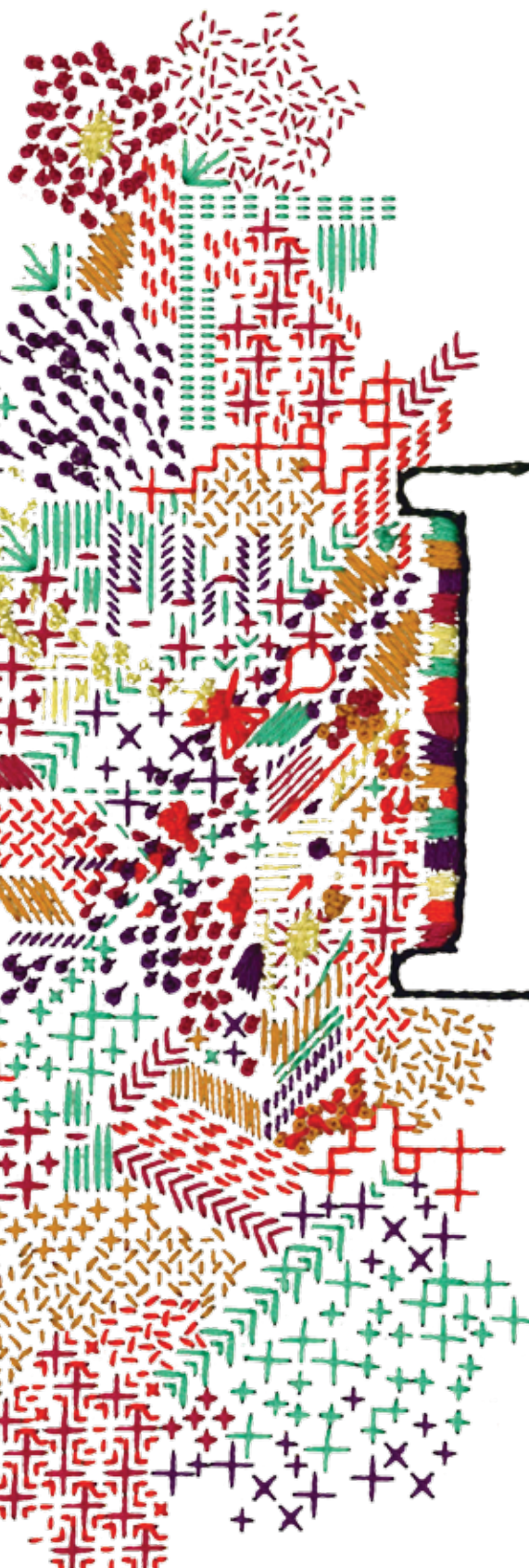
Not at Hinson. Our congregational meetings contribute to unity.

Why? These meetings are moments of unity because one of the agenda items of the meeting is the testimonies of prospective members. Hinson takes membership very seriously. If a person expresses interest in being a member, the process begins with a Newcomers Lunch and is followed by a meeting with a pastor and elder. At that time, the pastor asks the prospective member to share how they have come to be a follower of Christ. At the congregational meeting, these stories are shared and this provides a great moment for rejoicing at the work of God in salvation. The purposes of God in the gospel become front and center at our congregational meetings and thus our unity is grows.

Hinson Baptist Church has made tremendous strides in biblical unity since I became a member in 2008. We certainly are not perfect, but we are enjoying the blessings of God as we seek to be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.



Ron Marrs has been a member of Hinson Baptist Church since 2008 along with his wife, Becky. He served as the interim executive pastor for one and a half years and has served chairman of the elder board. He has been at Western Seminary for fourteen years and is Associate Pastor of Youth and Pastoral Ministries.



CHOOSING UNITY:

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

By Dr. Eric Moore

I

was born in Detroit, Michigan during the 1960s. At the time, the city (and country for that matter) was going through racial tensions. In 1967, there was a race riot in Detroit. At the age of seven, I remember tanks rolling down the major streets of our city. I never fully grasped the reasons for the riots, but I knew it had something to do with skin color.

Growing up in Detroit, I never personally felt like a minority. Everywhere I went, African Americans were the majority. My school was black. My church was black. My little league baseball and football teams were black. My role models (teachers, pastors, coaches) were all black. For this reason, history books didn't make sense to me. "How could we have been enslaved when it seems to me that we are really the majority?" This is what I thought until I went off to college. Then everything changed.

I attended Michigan State University where, for the first time, I had to accept the fact that I was a minority. My roommates were white. My suitemates were white (and played hockey). There was only one other African American on my floor of sixty students. It was culture shock. I had to decide to segregate or integrate. By God's grace, I chose the latter.

This experience has shaped my view of ministry. I have chosen to embrace my cultural heritage, but also to engage in the larger culture as a bridge builder and educator. Below are several ways in which I have tried to accomplish this mission.



EACH (EVERYONE A CHANCE TO HEAR)

In 2010, Pastor Bob Shirock (also a Western alumnus) envisioned unifying urban and suburban churches around a single cause: to impact southeastern Michigan with the love of Jesus Christ. To accomplish this task, white, black, Asian, Hispanic, wealthy and poor churches would need to unify. Our church was one of the first to get on board with this project. In fact, as a faculty member at Moody Theological Seminary—Michigan, I encouraged my students to get their churches involved in the movement. The movement began with a prayer walk through downtown Detroit. Since its inception, churches across the region have partnered together across ethnic and racial lines to restore homes, schools and communities. New churches have been started and old churches restored.


In our case, we partnered with a predominantly white church to create a city garden in Detroit where a home had been torn down. The lot had become a dumping ground. Together, a multi-racial team of volunteers transformed that ugly site into a beautiful garden space.

MISSION TRIPS AND SUPPORT

We planted our church in 2000 with the vision to give a percentage of all offerings to missions. This was seen as unusual in the African American community. I often heard that “we” (African Americans) have our own issues. Why were we sending money to people halfway around the world that we didn’t know? I no longer hear those comments. In our nearly seventeen years of existence, we have given hundreds of thousands of dollars to missions, supporting missions on every continent except Antarctica. We have a missionary from our church (who is white) serving in East Africa. We have partnered with larger white churches to do short term mission trips to Uganda and Haiti. My view is, “We can do more together for the kingdom than we can separately.”

DIVERSITY FORUMS

With the recent racial issues that have been highlighted in our country, the churches in our area decided not to wait until something tragic happened to respond. We decided to be proactive. In December 2015, these churches hosted a diversity forum. There were leaders from several churches in the area. Close to two thousand people were in attendance. On the panel were six Christian community leaders: four pastors and two parachurch leaders. The four pastors were from four different ethnic backgrounds. One was white, one was Jewish (messianic), one was Hispanic and the other (me) was African American. One parachurch leader was of Arab descent and the other was from a mixed background of white and African American. These discussions of what the Church should be in light of the recent racial tensions in our country were very fruitful. We’d love



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to think that because we had this very important forum, our community, with all of its racial tension, has not experienced a major racial conflict like we’ve seen in the media.

An offshoot of this was a “Q-Commons” presentation held in Detroit shortly after the diversity forum. The audience consisted of regional Christian leaders who were interested in hearing possible solutions to evolving problems in our community. I, along with the moderator and participants of the diversity forum, was invited to share our ideas with the greater Christian community in the area.

TEACHING

I have been an instructor and assistant professor since 2004—first at Michigan Theological Seminary and later Moody Theological Seminary—Michigan. This has been a great joy and a great challenge. Part of the challenge is helping those who come from a monolithic life and ministry background appreciate the cultural background of others. So whenever I can create team assignments where individuals from differing backgrounds are grouped together, I do it.

I have opened our church as a lab for our introductory intercultural studies course. Although I am not the instructor, I try to point out things that will enhance students’ appreciation of another culture. Sometimes this is well received. Other times it is not. However, my job is not to make students comfortable in their isolated world, but to

expose them to fellow believers who deeply and sincerely love the Lord, but may see the world a little differently than they do.

As a professor at Moody, I find that most of my speaking opportunities outside of my church come from non-African American churches. This was never intentionally planned; it just happens to work out this way. As a result, I find myself being a representative of the African American culture and church. Although I very rarely think about this when I go to preach, I often have a parent bring their son or daughter up to me after service to meet me. Then they will tell me that I have been a good role model for their kid who, unfortunately, has gotten their view of African American men from television, movies or the internet.

COACHING

Besides being a pastor and professor, I coach my son's baseball team. For the last two years, we have played travel baseball. Our team is the only majority African American team in our age group. Most of my players are from the inner city of Detroit. We play against suburban, majority white teams. Our team is not one of the better teams in the league. We play hard, but the other teams seem to be just a little bit better. However, my goal is more than just winning. It is more than just instilling values such as hard work and sportsmanship. It is to be a witness for Jesus Christ in the lives of my players and the other teams as well.

Before each home game, we tell the opposing team that they are invited to join us at the pitcher's mound to pray—every team in the league except one has joined us, and even the one that didn't, their head coach joined us although the team didn't. As a result, we have gained a reputation as one of the most sportsmanlike team in the league. This is a far cry from what we see on the news.

PRESENT SPACE

Last year, our church moved from a rental space in Southfield, Michigan, which was fifty-four percent African American (and growing) to Royal Oak, Michigan, which is less than 4 percent African American. This has created a challenge for us. Slowly but surely, the complexion of our congregation is changing. A year ago, our congregation was ninety-nine percent African American. Now it is about ninety percent. We have a few mixed race families now. As a result, we have changed some of our music and programs to accommodate this new growth.

DETROIT '67

At the beginning of this article, I spoke about the Detroit riot of 1967. Fifty years have passed since the destructive riot of that year. This year, our region is pushing to redeem the memory of the riots. Churches have chosen to focus on unification rather than segregation. As a result, I have been asked to speak at different venues regarding this issue. As of the writing of this article, I am being recorded on a broadcast that will be shown during the worship service of a majority white congregation. They asked if I could speak to them on a Sunday morning. Due to the commitments to my church, I had to decline the offer; so they will record my thoughts to present in one of their upcoming services. Hopefully, whatever I say will draw us together as the Body of Christ.

I don't have all the solutions to all the problems of the racial challenges in the church. However, I still believe, "We can do more together for the kingdom than we can separately." So we'll see what this new chapter holds for us.



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WISDOM IN A SOCIAL MEDIA AGE

By *Kate Zahradka*

My favorite thing about Facebook is how easy it makes organizing events. Girl's night? Birthday party? Create the event, invite friends, see who is bringing the veggie platter and who is bringing the chocolate, and you're good to go. It is such a great way to leverage a virtual tool to promote real world community. Unfortunately, social media platforms can have a darker side as well. As Christians living in an increasingly divided world, many of us are asking what it means to be discerning and thoughtful users of technology, particularly social media. How should our faith inform this area of our life? Although there are many ways we might positively leverage social media technology, it also subconsciously affects how we absorb information and communicate with each other, therefore shaping social norms for dialog and discourse. These norms are not just limited to digital platforms, but will affect how we make a phone call, send an email, and converse face to face, and so will eventually influence our church communities.

Many of us assume that technology is neutral, that it is how we use it individually and societally that makes it "good" or "bad." There is, in fact, an ongoing debate over the neutrality of technology: can we use technology without feeling its influence to some extent? This larger conversation aside (for further reading, Neil Postman is fascinating), how does social media directly shape our society's ways of communication?

First, a quick example to demonstrate how social media might subconsciously affect us. Facebook was not designed to be a serious delivery method for the news. Originally, it was a connecting platform for college students: a directory of sorts, with opportunities for friends to interact. Now, it can deliver the news, but it does so in a conflicted manner. A link to an article on a recent car bombing might be sandwiched between pictures of a friend's birthday and an advertisement for your most recent product search on Google. Yes, Facebook points to another article, perhaps one from a reputable news source, but that is not why most of us go to Facebook—we go to see what our friends are doing. When we are on Facebook, most likely we are not in a serious frame of mind, ready to give thoughtful attention and time to difficult things. Our Facebook newsfeeds are never-ending streams of information with no rubric to help us determine importance and no surrounding context or history to give understanding. Clearly in its design, Facebook was not intended to communicate the complex political and societal ideas and conflicts of the day, yet it does and because it was not designed to do so, it communicates this information poorly.

Further, many of us may not realize that Facebook newsfeeds are controlled by algorithms, which curate stories from the hundreds of people and organizations we follow. The benefit of this is that we are more likely to see more posts on things that interest us. The negative aspect is that our exposure to different ideas and opinion gets progressively less and less until we are stuck in an echo chamber. The result (as demonstrated in the 2016 presidential election) is that people tend to be more polarized and the moderate middle disappears.

I hope that the illustration I gave above is causing you to think about how subtly technology (in this case a social media platform) affects the way we absorb information. Posts, headlines and pictures do not deal with nuance. The platform to say whatever you want (in 140 characters or less) trains us to condense thoughts down to the essentials. Unfortunately, needed complexity and nuance can be lost in this, making it all too easy to ignore or misrepresent what we do not agree with. Further, when disagreements arise it is much easier to disengage, create caricatures, or say things you would never say to a person's face. We simply do not have to listen to what we do not like. In fact, most platforms even allow you to "hide" or "unfollow" another user if you choose. This is not altogether bad, but in face-to-face conversations, that is not an option. While virtual community does not replace real world community, neither is it divorced from it. When was the last time you read a post from a friend and it changed your opinion about him or her? For me, it becomes all too easy to think, "Oh, you're one of them. I've got you summed up in a nutshell now." This conclusion may affect how you perceive or treat a person, or group of people, when you meet them in the real world.

Contrast this with the power of a face-to-face conversation. The physical presence of another person demands your full focus: eye contact,

When we are face to face, we cannot deny our shared humanity and we can use that commonality to communicate with clarity and grace.

attention to tone, body language, and a response. The conversation may go any number of directions, which you must navigate even if the other holds a different point of view. You might choose to use careless or even hurtful words, but the impact of those words is usually immediate and inescapable. This context provides the opportunity for greater understanding, for questions and responses, and for empathy. When we are face to face, we cannot deny our shared humanity and we can use that commonality to communicate with clarity and grace.

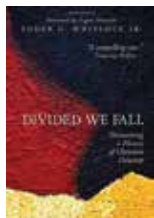
So what does all this have to do with unity within the Church? How we communicate on social media will be how we communicate in real time, and vice versa. Constructive conversation, loving rebuke, and patience with each other in our human frailty are hallmarks of unified bodies. To bear with one another in love, emphasizing the uniting truths that we cling to over all else, including politics, race, and wealth, is possible because of the power of the gospel, in which "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). In light of the tremendous grace shown to us, it is our joy and calling to extend that same grace to others.



Kate Zahradka is the Communications Director at Western Seminary. She is a graduate of Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego, CA and attends Hinson Baptist Church with her husband, Jeremy.

Recommended Resources

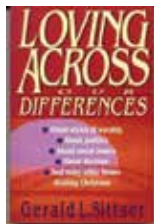
For additional reading on the topic of preserving Christian unity, we recommend the following books. These books may be purchased through Amazon Smile, which returns a percentage of the profit back to Western Seminary.



Divided We Fall: Overcoming a History of Christian Disunity

By Luder Whitlock, Jr. (P&R Publishing, 2017)

“Throughout the centuries, Christians have longed to be united with one another—supporting each other and working in harmony. But our reality is very different, and we need only to read the New Testament to realize that disunity has been with us from the start. What can we do to foster unity and deeper community in a world where so many relationships are fractured and fractious? Luder Whitlock Jr. explores God’s desire for unity in the church, overviews the history of global Christianity with an eye on its schisms and agreements, and points us toward the necessity of God-honoring fellowship, laying out steps we can take to increase trust and develop understanding, especially within the church.”



Loving Across Our Differences

By Gerald Sittser (IVP, 1994)

“Over and over again, the Bible calls believers to love and care for one another. But now, in a time of extraordinary pluralism, the many differences among Christians make the commands to love one another seem almost impossible. Yet Gerald Sittser believes the commands still apply, perhaps especially in light of our divisions....his book is warm and hopeful. It is marked by close attention to the Bible and dozens of real-life stories that show how we can, indeed, love across our differences.”



Irenicum: Healing the Divisions Among God's People

by Jeremiah Burroughs (Soli Deo Gloria, 1997 reprint of 1653 edition; other editions available)

“The last sermon that this great Puritan preached were on how the divisions among Christians in his day might be healed. Burroughs was greatly concerned by the breaks he saw believers making with their brothers in Christ, and addressed the issue shortly before his death. The answer was not in a blanket tolerance of all religions; nor was it to be found in a compromising attitude towards evil. Yet Christians must strive for unity and peace. Burroughs shows what divides us needlessly, and then how peace and unity may be sought.”



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