

# How Is Unity Possible?

(An Op-Ed)



“An Angel comforting Jesus before his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane”

Painting by Carl Heinrich Bloch

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Restoration Movement Literature

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From the very first moment I was a Christian, I have been concerned with unity (or the lack thereof) in Christ's church.

Early on, I thought the problems were just stubborn people: those who require others to do things the way they do them, regardless of what the matter is. I believe this is still common thinking among many, who view the main obstacle to unity as just "other stubborn people". What is inherent in that statement – though never said is, "If those stubborn people would just do things *my* way, we would all just get along!" There is no practical blame on us, most of the time, for any part of division with others.

However, as I have grown and learned, I have taken a different position: there are stubborn people, and they do cause problems, but that is both inevitable and immovable. Instead, I believe the main problem with Christian unity today is how Christians in general understand the Bible and what Jesus, as King, expects of us through it:

First, Biblical illiteracy is very high, even among regular attendees of church. This creates the present situation where the vast majority of believers "proof-text" their way to understanding anything in the Bible, as if the Bible was just a collection of random sayings – contradicting each other endlessly when ripped out of their contexts and placed side by side. One group quotes and prefers one verse, while another group quotes and prefers another verse.

This issue of Biblical illiteracy is highly ironic – in no other time in the history of the world can more people read – but

possibly in no other time in our own nation do people know less about the Bible.

To reverse this massively-disproportionate situation, the Word of God must be given its proper place and time in every worship service, study, and assembly of the church. If the total time spent in the Word of God in a service is less than the cumulative time spent in singing, there is a Scriptural-priority problem: from the very beginning, the Apostles' teaching was given primary focus in the worship service (Acts 2:42 – it is even listed first), whereas music is only mentioned in the New Testament in the context of private worship (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16), although in many churches today it is not given the larger time slot, but there actually services conducted today where there is no preaching, just music, calling into question if it is a Biblical assembly at all where there is no Lord's Supper and no preaching.

Therefore, it is this preacher's opinion that if a service is an hour long, preaching should be no less than 25 minutes, at least no shorter than any other element in the service, including music.

This preacher also believes that once the Word of God is "heard" (Romans 10:17), it should be studied. In the service, it is a great idea to take notes (your preacher takes notes on almost every sermon he gets to hear). Every Christian should have convenient access to solid Biblical literature, at least some produced in-house. I think it is silly that churches that pay preachers for so much of their time in a week to study but then the results of that study is

not made available to the congregation in most places. This is where most of the literature comes from at Callao Christian Church; it is a natural outgrowth of my weekly study and preparation for preaching and teaching.

Therefore, churches should provide paper, pens, and literature each time the church meets for convenient and accessible study beyond the hearing of the Word each week. Each Christian, in turn, should take advantage of each of these, building a library of literature, material, and personal notes to build their own faith week by week, deeper and deeper in God's Word.

Why is it important that study material be "convenient and accessible"? Especially for the young in Christ, they will naturally flock to whatever is most readily available to them. Many people are attracted to TV preachers and their ilk because all they have to do is watch TV to "learn" from them! We in the church must provide similarly-accessible materials so that what is "learned" among our people - new or old - is what is right!

As well, sermons readily, regularly, and conveniently available on CD and other digital formats is important for those who miss, want to review, or study further can easily do so.

Literature and audio ministries used to be common bulwarks (strongholds) of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Christian Churches and Churches of Christ. It needs to come back!

However, none of this matters if the preacher refuses to dive beyond the surface-truths of Scripture: if a preacher will not or

simply does not talk about sin, God's redemptive plan since the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), the crucifixion, the resurrection, the various errors that the Apostles corrected in Acts and throughout the New Testament letters, heaven, hell, and the end of the world according to the Bible, then all of the literature and sermonizing (of any length) will be of no value. Preachers, we must supply milk to the spiritual babes while feeding our long-time believers with the meat of the Gospel! This will not happen through the latest "Christian" pop-culture book study; this will only happen with an expository study of the Word of God!

Preachers, to accomplish this, I suggest middle-of-the-road Sunday morning messages – challenging for the babe, but enough meat for the long-time believer. At the same time, it needs to be plainly clear that at least one other time of the week – a Sunday evening or Wednesday evening possibly – is dedicated to truly the "meat" of Scripture, and the people understand this is available to them. This way, those who are truly hungry for more "meat" can have their fill, and you build a very solid, large base of Biblically-oriented members. Finally, put your research out for people to get if they want it. Don't just put those sermons in a drawer!

Some preachers will say, "What if someone steals my material?" First, did you really invent it, or is it God's Word? And second, imitation is the most sincere form of flattery – if someone "steals" your stuff that means it must have been good enough to steal! Worry less about your supposed intellectual property (when it comes to the sermons you preached in public anyway) and more about educating your people. If you want to write a book, that very

well may be a different issue altogether, but what you preach should be available in print form for your people at the very least.

Second, Christianity has become an emotionally-driven, reactive experience for most. The world says, “Follow your heart”, and so people have taken this “to heart” with their religion. But God says in Romans 12:2, “...transform your minds THEN you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is...” (emphasis mine) Until Christianity’s emotions are a result of its intelligence (and in that case, there will be much real joy!), and not its emotions dismissing its intelligence, Christianity for most will simply be one emotional experience to the next, where one person’s experience contradicting another’s has no means of being understood objectively.

This will not change until – starting with the leadership – any church puts its primary focus on the learning of the Word of God - and not programs, events, music, or anything else. All of those things need to be in subjection, and of lower priority, than the general dissemination and promoting of the Bible.

Third, church government has become absolutely chaotic. The simple New Testament standard has Christ as the Head of His church - speaking through His Word (the Bible) - with the eldership in authority of the local church, and everything human therefore operating under that eldership.

Instead, church government has become one of any thousands of imaginations. Single-man elderships, otherwise known as “pastors”, rule most churches today, with a board of

deacons under them that vary wildly in influence and purpose. Para-church organizations, missions, and church-supported colleges almost all operate independently of any local church, without the guidance and established authority of an eldership. This has created massive confusion as to application of Biblical authority in almost every matter conceivable.

As well, human forms of government – all imperfect (though some less imperfect than others!) – have made their way into superseding God’s established form of church government. Voting, boards, committees, and congregational meetings have been made *de facto* authorities of most churches (especially in the United States). These things may serve a *functional* purpose (how else could the elders know what the deacons are doing, or how could the deacons know what the elders expect of them, unless they meet regularly?), but they cannot Biblically serve an *authoritative* purpose, which most of these extra-Biblical forms of church government have become. When people want to be heard, they should be heard; when they *demand* control outside of God’s established authority, nothing short of the above-mentioned chaos ensues.

Fourth, the practical ability to exercise one’s religion freely, based purely on the convictions of God’s Word, is very difficult for most people because of one or more of the following factors: culture, tradition, familial expectations, past emotional, traumatic or religious baggage, or other reasons.

For example, if you have a father who is a die-hard Chevrolet fan, will he ever convert to being a Ford fan? Even over something so didactic, most of us understand such allegiances are “for life”, if they have absolutely no eternal significance.

Now imagine something much more serious – somebody from a Muslim background comes to faith in Christ as their Lord and Savior. This necessarily excludes their previous belief system that “Allah is God and Muhammad is his prophet.” We all know the family pressure from many Muslim families would range – at the very least – from estrangement – to the very most – murder (“honor killings” of various kinds).

On a smaller level, this same kind of thing happens with Christianity: someone who prefers to attend a service with more modern music – or no music at all (a secret preference of your present preacher) – could very well be shunned and/or forbidden to do so by family or friends. Ironically, there is not a single worship service mentioned or exemplified in the New Testament where music occurred, yet it has become a highly-relevant issue in churches today.

Fifth, there is the very sensitive issue of Scriptural silence. We must speak of salvation, as Scripture speaks of it. We must speak of women’s role in the church, because the Scripture speaks of it. Must we speak of the role of instruments, although Scripture is silent? For many, this is a non-issue and treated as such; however, for a very significant population, the issue of instruments of worship is very important, and unbeknownst to most is an



absolute dividing point for that group. This is where the issue of “where the Scripture is silent” comes into serious play. How do we determine issues on which the Scripture is silent?

Endless theologians and scholars have attempted to answer this question, but this preacher has often found the typical answers to be less than satisfactory for the following main two reasons:

1) Many scholars and preachers simply blame “others” for being too stubborn and divisive.

2) Many scholars and preachers have incorrectly developed an idea that Christian unity and Biblical authority have some kind of never-ending “balancing act”, as if the issues have no ultimately common ground.

An illustration might be helpful to begin to explain my views: when I was in business, I mostly created, sold, and serviced my own products. To sell a product (and especially to do it again), I had to successfully present, sell, install, follow-up, service, all on a satisfactory level, especially if I expected repeat business. I did have lots of repeat business, not because I was perfect (far from it), but I became consistent over time in the above principles. My dad told me once, “If you do one thing very well, for a long time, in the same place, you will be successful.” This implies that skill + time + stability = success.

If we take our illustration, and apply it, most Christianity “sold” today was created by someone else (other than God), is expected to be self-serviced, with no follow-up. This very

superficial analysis shows us that most of Christianity today is a broken system, never with a hope to be sustained.

As a point of contrast, if we continue with our illustration's imagery, Biblical Christianity only "sells" a product made by God (His Word, His Way), under the "follow-up" of the shepherding of an eldership (His only established earthly authority), "serviced" by the deacons and other volunteers of the church, with burdens carried altogether (Acts 2:42ff, Galatians 6:1ff).

For this reason it is MASSIVELY important how a church is organized and governed. Biblical Christianity leads to a church that has order and peace inherent to its structure, while the various other forms of man-made church government invites the chaos, instability, and division so apparent in today's churches.

As well, any para-church organization, mission, or church-based college should also be under this same structure. If they were, built-in accountability, regular and open dialogue, and unity would all be inherent in that structure. The present situation in most churches' man-made governments necessarily create power struggles, independent wandering on doctrine and practice, and no regular dialogue to reassess and reunite.

A final statement on the issue of silence in the Scripture – can we really debate any area of silence – when we have yet to perfect every last expressed command of our King? Is it not ostentatious of us to place such a priority on an issue of silence, when we have not yet done all we have been told to do? Perhaps this is the ultimate check of our King – our assignment is already infinite in

scope (“go into the entire world making disciples”) – have we any logical room for anything more?

Finally, there must be a cessation of the belief that Christian unity and Biblical authority are whatsoever opposing forces; it is my belief that if a church is truly Biblically-adherent, unity is a natural by-product: anything from church services to church government done Biblically will inherently produce a united people for the Bible itself speaks of unity – and against division – and the prayers of Jesus (especially in John 17) which of course call for unity of His church. There is no need to “sacrifice” one for the other at all, but rather recognize that one is the cause (Biblical authority) and the other the effect if we are following the Bible rightly (Christian unity). The “fruit” tells us what we are: an otherwise-orthodox church that is legalistic and splits over hairs is not Biblical just like a church that is liberal and sacrifices Biblical authority for the sake of everybody getting along.

In summary (and in my opinion), Christian unity can be possible when:

1) Biblical literacy improves through the prioritizing of the study of the Word of God in our assemblies, services, and studies, as well as solid literature and material is made available by the preacher, and Christians take advantage of it.

2) Christianity abandons the world’s philosophy of “follow your heart” and instead adopts God’s plan that our minds be transformed, and we let our emotions be subject to the transformed minds God gave us (Romans 12:1+2).

3) Biblical church government is practiced and man-made polity is abandoned. As well, all para-church organizations, missions, and church-based colleges need to be under this same Biblical government.

4) Christians decide they are going to obey God through His Word over culture, tradition, family, or other external pressures.

5) Scriptural silence is only debated when all the express commands of Scripture have been fully carried out (in realization that they never will be in our humanity).

6) We realize that Christian unity is the natural effect to the cause that is Biblical authority. They are not opposing or even complementary forces; the Bible, when obeyed as it instructs, naturally produces unity. If divisions and unrest abound, it is far more likely we are not obeying the Bible as the Bible has instructed. One naturally produces the other; they are a harmonious cause and effect, not equal and opposite forces.

The above is all my opinion; I labeled this booklet an “op-ed”, because that is what it is. It is not written professionally; there is plenty of first-person language (“I think”), and inevitably, I have failed to be comprehensive and I am sure there are errors in my thinking.

My plea is to seek the Kingdom of God first, letting everything else fall into place as a result (Matthew 6:33). Jesus is King (Matthew 28:18). Let’s obey Him to produce unity!