

One day, a man was walking across a bridge and saw another man standing on the edge, about to jump off. He immediately ran to him and said, “Stop! Don’t do it!” “Well, why shouldn’t I?” he replied. The other said, “Well, there’s so much to live for!” “Like what?” “Well ... are you religious or atheist?” “Religious.” “Me too! And are you Christian or Jewish?” “Christian.” “Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?” “Protestant.” “Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?” “Baptist.” “Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?” “Baptist Church of God.” “Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?” “Reformed Baptist Church of God.” “Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?” “Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!” To which he called him a heretic and pushed him off the bridge.

The author of this joke, reflects... “When we get together with our family here in Israel on Shabbat, we often find ourselves discussing and even arguing our views on various topics, political, spiritual, etc. You may have heard the phrase two Jews, five opinions? That’s our family. At the end, we all laugh about who argued best and try to learn from one another. The body of the Lord is one big family. Yes, we differ in opinion on some issues. But we are going to be together for eternity and we must learn to live in peace with one another! In order for us to make a real difference in the world, the world needs to see us as one, united in faith and love with God and one another.”

Turns out, Jesus thought highly of unity and oneness as well. Actually, it was so important to him, that he took time out to pray to God... **John 17:20-24**

Unity in the Church is a theme not dedicated to a specific day on the calendar of the Christian year, and that is because it is a theme that needs to be in constant consideration. In a day of embarrassing fractures, congregations must step back from their own local concerns and highlight the unity of the body for which Jesus himself prayed. Doing so gives each particular congregation the opportunity to recommit themselves to a life of unity.

A few different lenses in which to consider unity for the church, all of which are equitably important, include:

- Local unity sees worshipers of a local community experiencing their oneness in Christ without regard to their diverse experiences, ethnicity, opinions, or gender.

- Generational unity sees worshipers of all age levels sharing their oneness in Christ and encouraging one another.
- Historical unity sees the worshipers of today affirming their oneness with those who have gone before, perhaps many centuries before.
- Global unity sees God's people of a variety of cultures and traditions affirming one another's value, praying for one another, and joining in service together.

Any of you seen the movie or read the book *Boys in the Boat*? It is centered around a rowing crew from the University of Washington who have their sights set on rising to the top of the sport in collegiate athletics. Day after day, pull by pull, they fought and scratched and clawed to be one organism made of different parts, each doing what they needed to do. In the beginning they were individuals, but rowing and joining together on that boat, made them one. The glory of their story comes when they become so good at being one that they overtake the varsity squad, qualify for the Olympics, and go on to win gold. Was it easy? No. Did it come natural? No, not always. But it became their purpose and pride.

Did you know that the image of rowing, being a rower in the belly of a ship, is the root of the definition of what it means to being good stewards of Christ? Not only does it mean stepping up and doing your part, but it also means the ship operates best when all of us are able to row together, do our part, as one. And as we identified a moment ago, "all of us" does not mean only those of us in this room. It means the entire body of Christ to which we are a part.

There is one Savior and one Lord of the church that the community of people who are the body of Christ are united in faith, hope, love, worship, and service. Closely related to the idea of the church's unity is that of its catholicity. "Catholic" means universal. The church is catholic in that it unites in faith and life Christians in all times and places; of all races, classes, languages, cultures, nationalities; in all kinds of political, economic, and social situations. Paul writes in Ephesians 4, "**There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.**" There is one bread and one cup. There is one body, the "one holy catholic and apostolic church."

One day a professor demonstrated to his class the power of an electromagnet. He placed 2 lbs. of nails on a table with the wires of an electromagnet under the table. When he flipped the switch, the nails came together and he was able to form the nails into various shapes as long as the current was on. When the current was cut, the nails fell back into a pile. This reminds us that as long as the current of God, the Holy Spirit, runs through us, we have *unity* with one another, and we can become who God calls us to be in mission and ministry. (Johnny Bley - Sermons Central).

What we often see, however, is not one church, but many churches. We see Orthodox, Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, non-denominational, and more. Even churches that follow one or another of the great classical theological traditions are split into different churches, each of which claims that its interpretation of the tradition is the most authentic and faithful one. Moreover, there are separate denominations or congregations within denominations for ethnic majorities and for ethnic minorities who “would not feel at home” in each other’s church, for “upper” and for “lower” classes, for those who do and for those who do not accept people who associate differently in sexuality or other ways- and on and on. Behind some of these divisions lie genuinely important differences of theological interpretation- concerning predestination, authority of scripture, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the gifts of the Spirit, holiness, and Christian hope for the future. However, sometimes doctrinal differences are only the excuse to split the church along many of the same lines in which societal splits are defined. In either case, the splintering of the church into many churches screams that the church is not one, not catholic (and therefore not holy either- we will talk about “holy” as a mark of the church next week). And that implies we don’t have one but many lords, are led not by one but by many spirits- different currents competing and canceling each other out leaving all in a pile of rubble.

For years, I have been asked what I believe to be the key to ministry. The power of God goes without saying and is implied in the context of the question I believe, so the question is really what I believe to be the key task we can seek to embody as the church to fulfill the image in which God has called us. The answer I have given and still stand by today is bridge building. Not only do I believe it is the key to ministry, I also believe it to be the art of ministry. Building a bridge and providing a way to connect for two parties that think they are fine without the other, and in some cases, better without the other, is the key and art to ministry Jesus prays and Paul teaches we would set at the front of our sights.

Shirley Guthrie offers, “Rather than look at each other as separate, I would propose what is known as the “branch theory”, in which various denominations and groups within are like different branches of the same tree. Whether rich or poor, educated or uneducated, liberal or conservative, we are all bound together by our common faith, need, for Christ! The unity of the body of Christ is not a rigid uniformity. There are legitimate differences among the various members of the body. But, in saying this, believing this, we must note the differences mentioned in the New Testament (Paul’s letters to the Corinthians and Romans), are not sociological or even theological, but differences of gift and task. Also, nowhere does the New Testament suggest that the different members of the body can live in self-sufficient isolation or in downright opposition to each other. Paul’s very point is that churches need each other and must live together in mutual cooperation if the whole body

is to be healthy and function properly. 1 Corinthians 12:7 says, **“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the *common* good.”**

What then? What do we do, are we called by God to do, as disunity seems to be prevailing in the church; as local, generational, historic, global unity is ignored or denied or believed too difficult to pursue?

- We must give up our attempts to justify, excuse, or explain away the scandal of the church’s disunity and brokenness. We must acknowledge the sinfulness of the wrangling within and the divisions between churches and denominations that call ourselves the body of Christ.
- We must stop fighting ourselves and instead, join together to fight the fight we really need to be fighting- God’s cosmic battle with the devil. Disunity is the devil’s playground and we are feeding right into it.
- We must examine ourselves before we criticize the faith and life of other denominations and groups within our own denomination. “Is it really our steadfast holding to biblical truth that separates us from others- or perhaps only the desire to insist on the superiority of our limited and self-serving interpretation of it?” Is the disunity and brokenness of the church due to someone else’s or our own sinfulness?
- We must be willing to be open and talk with other denominations and groups within our denomination. What if the Spirit of God is also at work among them? “Dialogue” is not a magic solution to the problem of the church’s lack of unity and catholicity, but the problem can never be solved without dialogue.
- We must accept that unity does not mean uniformity. All Christians do not have to think or live exactly alike. True unity does not mean a boring and sterile sameness; it is a unity in which there is exciting and mutually enriching diversity. This doesn’t mean a wide open “pluralism” in which “anything goes.” There are limits to what Christians can believe and do if it is the one Lord, one Spirit, one God of scripture we confess and serve.

The church being ONE and CATHOLIC, having unity, is just that easy, and it is just that hard. But how can we refuse to take the risks and run the dangers of such attitudes and actions if we really want the one holy catholic and apostolic church we confess?

\*perspective of one and catholic adapted from *Christian Doctrine* by Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr.