

Connection with Unit Theme: To complement the small group study of *Thrive: Living in Real Joy*, these sermon outlines will use the same Scripture passages as the small group study, so the pastor can reinforce the study from the pulpit.

The Point: We can live in love and humility even as Christ did.

Introduction: When I was growing up, we had a teacher in our church who was once married to a pastor. She often talked about the first church her husband served. It was literally divided down the middle. Half the congregation would sit on one side of the auditorium, the other half would sit on the other side, and neither group spoke to the other. She and her husband later found out that the whole split was over a piano. Half the congregation wanted to buy one kind of piano, the other half wanted to buy another, and the disagreement was so contentious that it split the church.

I've been a Southern Baptist all my life, and I learned a long time ago that churches can split over the silliest reasons. However, these issues are usually symptoms of deeper problems, such as pride and self-centeredness. How do we overcome these attitudes and maintain unity in the church?

I. The right mindset.

- A. Paul called on them to have four attitudes (the "if" phrases are first-class conditionals in the Greek, meaning the condition is assumed to be true).
 1. "Consolation in Christ" – The word translated "consolation" is the Greek word *paraklesis*. It means "encouragement" or "exhortation".
 2. "Comfort of love" – The word translated "comfort" often refers to "persuasive address." In this case it probably refers to persuasion for the purpose of consolation.
 3. "Fellowship of the Spirit" – "Fellowship" has been defined as, "A relation between individuals which involves common and mutual interest and participation in a common object." In this case, the fellowship is created by and centered in the Holy Spirit.
 4. "Bowels and mercies" – These two terms are related.
 - a. "Bowels" literally refers to one's entrails, but in this case Paul used it figuratively to refer to the seat of one's affections or sympathies.
 - b. "Mercies" denotes pity and/or compassion.
- B. He instructed them to fulfill his joy by preserving unity in the church.
 1. Several issues had evidently sown seeds of division.
 - a. Criticisms of Paul (1:15-18).
 - b. Enemies outside the church (3:18-19).
 - c. Disagreements between Euodias and Synteché (4:2-3).

2. Church unity takes work.
 - a. It requires humility.
 - b. It requires a willingness to admit your mistakes.
 - c. It requires sacrifice.

II. The right motive.

- A. We should keep a humble spirit.
 1. “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory” – Other translations say “Do nothing through selfish ambition or empty conceit.”
 - a. The Bible says a great deal about pride, and none of it is good.
 - b. Many church splits are the result of pride.
 2. “Lowliness of mind” – Other translations say “humility of mind.”
 - a. Like Paul, we should remember that we are who we are by the grace of God (1 Cor. 15:9-10).
 - b. When you keep a humble spirit, you will find it difficult to take offense over small matters.
- B. We should maintain a selfless spirit.
 1. We should consider other people in addition to yourself.
 - a. You are part of Christ’s body, the church.
 - b. You need other people and they need you.
 2. What happens when you show consideration to others?
 - a. Most church fights take care of themselves.
 - b. You have less time to worry about your own “unmet needs.”
 - One of my pet peeves is when church members complain that their “needs aren’t being met”. Since when is church about meeting your needs? Jesus said He did not come to be served, but to serve (Matt. 10:45).

III. The right model.

- A. Jesus is the ultimate model of humility and selflessness.
 1. He held the ultimate status.
 - a. He was in the “form” of God.
 - The word translated “form” is the Greek word *morphe*, which refers to an outward display of an inner reality.
 - b. Though He was equal with God, He did not cling to that status.
 2. He took the ultimate step downward.
 - a. He “made himself of no reputation”.
 - The literal translation from the Greek is, “He emptied Himself.” Opinions vary on what this means. Most likely it means He gave up all physical manifestations of His deity (that is, He was still God, but His divine nature was concealed).
 - b. He could have come to earth as a king or a nobleman, but instead He “took on the form of a servant.”
 3. He made the ultimate sacrifice.
 - a. He gave up His own life.
 - b. He died the cruelest and most humiliating death known to man.
 4. He received the ultimate reward.
 - a. God highly exalted Him.
 - b. In the end, everyone will know He is Lord.
- B. When we focus on Christ, most other things will take care of themselves.

1. No matter what sacrifices you make in this life, He made a much greater sacrifice for you.
2. When your chief aim is the glory of Christ, you don't worry so much about getting your own way.

Conclusion: When I was in college, there were two Baptist churches located across the street from each other. Both were good churches; I attended one of them, and I had several friends who attended the other. One of my schoolmates once asked me what the difference was between the two churches. I told him as far as I knew there was no difference. Both were Southern Baptist churches with pastors who preached the Word of God faithfully. He then asked why they were built so close to each other. I responded, "That probably goes back to something that happened years ago that both sides have long since forgotten." Years later I was telling that story to my former college pastor. He chuckled and said, "No, they haven't *all* forgotten about it!" He didn't share any details, and I didn't ask!

Are church splits ever necessary? Perhaps, when an essential biblical principle is at stake. Unity at all costs is not biblical, and it's certainly better to divide than to compromise the Word of God. However, let's face it: most church splits have nothing to do with biblical principles. The vast majority of them are over relatively trivial issues. Such splits are remembered for years, and often become a hindrance to the church's outreach. Let us work to preserve the unity of Christ's body, and keep our eyes on the Savior who made the ultimate sacrifice!

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