

How Unity Makes us Better

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Abstract

We will examine strategic principles of collaboration that lead to greater fruitfulness in our personal and professional lives. Key examples from 30 years of experience will offer wisdom about vision, relationships, building trust and leveraging resources – all of which flows out of the kind of unity Jesus prayed for in John 17.

Introduction

Jesus told His disciples, upon word of His return to His Father: “*The works that I do will you do also; and greater works than these will you do*” (John 14:1-12). Is that phenomenal promise being fulfilled today, in part, through technology? Certainly the backdrop of living in the age of instant communication makes a tremendous contribution to the accessibility of knowledge and expertise – not to mention the gospel – that was unimaginable to the disciples in their time.

But the focus of this conference is not only on technology but also on how technology impacts transformation – not just the acquiring of information. Students of the Bible will be quick to remember that the context of Jesus’ message in John 14 was the announcement of the role of the Holy Spirit as the *power behind* true spiritual transformation. Any other power – be it political, military or technological – pales by comparison.

So, in the face of all that God has supplied for us in our modern era, it would be wise for us to increase our understanding of how He wants to empower the use of these resources to enable us to accomplish the “greater things” He was referring to.

In John 17, we get a glimpse of Jesus’ compassionate heart. During His final earthly hours, we have an actual record of Jesus’ conversation with His Father. And you and I were on His mind! It is very moving to see Jesus’ earnest prayer for every person in the world – that they would experience the same love that His Father has for Him (v.23).

Discovering Unity

*“May they experience such perfect unity
that the world will know that You sent Me
and that You love them as much as you love Me.”*
(John 17:23, NLB)

Note that the main focus of Jesus’ prayer wasn’t just on believers being unified or even on the salvation of the lost (though those things were mentioned). His greatest concern was for us **to be united with Him and His Father**.

Jesus didn’t just pray for believers to experience unity *like* He and His Father share. He spoke of us experiencing actual unity *with* Him and God the Father – knowing them eternally (v. 3), living in their protection (v. 11), joy (v. 13), and holiness (vs. 17, 19). Jesus wants us to share the same glory and love that He and His Father share (vs. 22-23): “that they may be **in Us**,” Jesus prayed (John 17:21).

There is something transformational that happens to us as believers when we find oneness with Jesus and God the Father in the way just described. Experiencing and demonstrating that kind of oneness, Jesus said in John 17, is a path that will lead the world to believe in Him. And oneness with God also enables us to have unity with each other.

Of course, we can experience some level of unity as friends, business partners, etc. But to know the kind of supernatural unity Jesus talks about starts by experiencing intimate unity with Him. A.W. Tozer explains it with this vivid picture:

“Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but . . . each one looking away to Christ. [Thus, they are] in heart, nearer to each other than they could possibly be if they turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.”¹

Unity Empowered by the Spirit

How is it possible to become that “in tune” with God? Certainly, it is beyond our human ability. Jesus knows this, and that is why, just before He prays for our unity in John 17, He introduces the Holy Spirit as the *means* for us to establish that intimate unity with God. To calm the disciples’ reaction to His announcement about returning to heaven, Jesus promised a Helper that will unite believers with Him (John 14:16-18).

As a result, the Holy Spirit’s constant indwelling in the lives of believers enables us to be in tune with God on a daily basis as we yield to the Holy Spirit’s leading. How? Jesus said, “*He will guide you into all truth...He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.*” (John 16:13b-14) Think for a moment about the quality of unity that is available to us when it proceeds from a Source like that!

I think Jesus emphasized the unity of believers in this last prayer before the cross because He knew how difficult and yet important unity would be for the future of the

¹ Tozer, A.W. *The Pursuit of God*, Christian Publications, Harrisburg, PA, 1948.

church (Ephesians 4:3). It would be His means of protecting us from Satan's power (John 17:15) and the way the world would believe in Jesus and come to know God's love for us (John 17:23).

Even secular business recognizes the power of collaboration. But Jesus' provision of the Holy Spirit changes everything for believers. When we are walking in the Spirit, our unity with others is sourced in the oneness the Holy Spirit provides with Jesus and God the Father (John 17:21-23). Think of it!

When we trust in ourselves we get what man can do. When we walk in the Spirit's power we get what God can do (Psalm 56:3-4). But we must be sure we appropriate His power through a life that is cleansed, aligned with God's Word and walking by faith in Him alone.

Unity takes Humility

Walking in the Spirit is also the only way to can walk humbly (Ephesians 5:18-21). Otherwise, we are just too prone to operate according to the default of our own human nature! For instance, most people are naturally suspicious – at least that's what I've seen in over 30 years of networking. The potential for unity is often threatened if others look, sound, act or think differently than we do. Sometimes we are hesitant to work together because we are so partial to our own ministry philosophy or approach that we quietly question if anyone else's is as valid as ours. I remember hearing one person's response to criticism: "Well, maybe our way of doing it wrong is better than their way of not doing it!"

Just prior to the launch of the National Network of Youth Ministries in 1979, the national leaders of Cru's high school ministry met at their headquarters at Arrowhead Springs, California to discuss a strategy to reach every teenager in the U.S. They shared their passion for the millions of lost teenagers and their burden to do more to reach them. As they knelt together to pray, the Spirit brought conviction to the whole group about how arrogant it was to assume that any one ministry could reach every teenager. There was weeping and a sense of God's lingering presence. When the group reconvened, the discussion shifted perspective – not "How could *we* reach every teenager?" but rather "What *role* could we play in helping reach every teenager?" This proved to be a critical adjustment, paving the way for the idea to host a meeting for discussion with national youth ministry leaders. What they thought would be a one-time meeting spawned what became the National Network of Youth Ministries (NNYM), uniting youth leaders in 800 cities across the United States and other countries as well.

The pattern in Scripture is that God is never impressed by those who are impressed with themselves, their possessions, or their accomplishments. Rather, He wants us to empty ourselves of those things so He can fill us fully with Himself. Talk about "contrary to human nature!" Everything within us wants to project success and shun failure. Yet, the irony of God's way is that when we humble ourselves before Him, He bestows His grace upon us (James 4:10) to accomplish His purposes.

When we start by experiencing unity with God, it is not so hard to leave our "logos and egos at the door." Our ideas are really His ideas (Psalm 37:4). As we submit ourselves to His will and His plan that spans the ages, we don't have to hold so tightly to our own ideas,

thinking they are our “intellectual property.” I have found that God rarely gives a great idea to just one person. He usually plants it in a number of unique individuals and in His mysterious way, weaves their efforts together to accomplish His purpose.

In that scenario, there is no room for anything but humility. Still, it is hard not to feel a sense of awe at the privilege of being united with God and with others in furthering His kingdom purposes!

Unity Requires Mutual Trust

If there is a “secret sauce” for working together in unity, mutual trust is undoubtedly the main ingredient. When NNYM was just beginning, I remember the skepticism that different ones expressed about how difficult it would be to get some denominations involved or some national youth ministries to be supportive. Some small churches were intimidated by the involvement of a big church in town. Others didn’t have the time or didn’t see the need to network with anyone. Some feared that doctrinal purity or ministry priorities might be compromised – or that unity might mean “uniformity.”

In the context of John 17 and Jesus’ prayer for unity within the body of Christ, it is hard to argue against it. But, for most of us, it comes down to the practicalities – how do we establish the kind of trust that will enable us to experience unity? Unity is not automatic. It is not a mushy emotional feeling. True unity is transformational. It yields practical results and presses us to integrate our faith into the reality of daily life. When unity flows out of our relationship with Christ, the Apostle Paul says it is as real as a human body *“joined and held together by every supporting ligament [that] grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”* (Ephesians 4:16)

But unity is a process. I’ve met many well-meaning people who say they tried collaborating and it just didn’t work. Some walked away feeling that it is overrated – an idealistic attempt to accomplish something together that could have been easier to accomplish alone.

The process of collaboration is multifaceted. Most failures in working together are the result of ignoring the process. Collaboration starts by simply connecting with one another. Often we are initially impressed by the chemistry, giftedness, reputations, urgency or opportunities that surface. Hopeful, we may grab hands and dive into a united effort, investing manpower, time and resources. But too often, we know little of what to expect because we have not sufficiently counted the cost (Luke 14:28-32).

It is good to connect. That’s where collaboration starts – interacting with others who share common interests. However, it is only the first step. Many give “networking” a bad rap because they assume a monthly meeting is all there is to being united and are disappointed when this low-risk, entry-level activity yields few outcomes. Still, it is foundational.

In the spirit of Ecclesiastes 4:12, we’ve learned that unity is facilitated by a cord of four strands. The foundational strand, as we discussed, is *connecting*. That can grow into *cooperating* on something with low risk. The third strand is *coordinating* which requires more commitment and medium risk. The highest level is that of *collaborating* where there

is a high commitment of resources, planning and decision making. With the addition of each strand the “cord of unity” increases in strength.

There is much more that could be said about the process of building unity. (I’ve written about it in my book Better Together.) But the point here is that we must come to a point of mutual trust if we are to have a foundation for unity with one another.

Though there is a lot to unity, it doesn’t have to be complicated. Charles Finney, a leader of the Second Great Awakening in the 1800’s, made a simple observation that has great value as we seek to establish mutual trust. He said, *“Nothing tends more to cement the hearts of Christians than praying together. Never do they love one another so well as when they witness the outpouring of each other’s hearts in prayer.”*

As simplistic as that sounds, I believe it is a profound truth. I have seen it happen many times. When people of similar purpose come together, it is amazing how similar their prayers are. Some may have hesitations or stereotypes to begin with, but hearing a sincere prayer from their brother or sister – even someone they do not know – often resonates within their own heart. God uses their prayers to help them trust each other and unite around a common purpose.

The priority of Jesus’ prayer in John 17:21 was that believers would be one with each other – and with Him and His Father. That gives a new meaning to “mutual trust” – trusting each other because we trust God and His plan to redeem the world through our oneness.

Unity Accomplishes God’s Highest Purposes

When we have oneness with God, we become instruments for His kingdom purposes on earth. Jesus prays to His Father in John 17 for the whole world to *“believe that You sent me.”* Jesus wants everyone to experience the same kind of love that God has shown Him (v. 23). He wants the glory God gave Him to be reflected within each of us through our unity (v. 21).

For those of us in youth ministry, our deep burden to reach the emerging generations is the common cause that motivates us to work together. We are more passionate about that cause than ever before due to the increased complexity of today’s culture impacting the 42 million youth, ages 10-19.² These are the future leaders of our families and our churches, our institutions and our nation. Yet this precious resource is at risk as the culture around them persistently tries to chip away at their beliefs, their ethics and their hope.

This only increases our motivation to stand in the gap for this generation! The fact remains that the vast majority of all who receive Christ will do so by age 18. Still, the scope of the task seems foreboding at times.

It is amazing to consider the way Jesus accomplishes His will on earth. It will not by programs, power or politics. Jesus indicated that the world will believe our message when we come together in complete unity – *both with God and with each other* (John 17:21-23). How is this possible? Probably not like we may think. We who live in the era of political,

² U.S. Census Bureau, ACS demographic and housing estimates, 2008-2012

military and technological power are still not accustomed to God's simple manner, shown in Scripture, where He accomplishes His will through humble means – aged parents, a shepherd boy, a widow's mite, loaves and fish, a baby in a manger. But that is God's way. It brings to mind what God told the prophet in Zechariah 4:6 about how His people would find restoration: *“Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty.”*

We all have apprehensions, doubts and fears. Christ's disciples had theirs – like when Jesus announced that He was returning to His Father. At the same time, He told them that He would provide the Holy Spirit to empower them, as they walked together in faith, to minister at a revolutionary level (John 14: 1-12). We are the result of the faithfulness of the disciples who found unity with God and each other through the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

It's a mystery to me that, in God's grand design for the universe, He repeatedly chooses to demonstrate His attributes through partnership with people like you and me. And though we have been talking about uniting with others, unity really starts with one person – you, me, and others who will walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8) and respond to His voice in obedience (1 Samuel 3). It is that individual's response that God may use to set in motion a whole network of people who will unite to accomplish God's purposes. But first, there is that one person who humbly leads the way.

“The Lord looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God” (Psalm 14:2).