

OUR LIFE TOGETHER

A United Fellowship

INTRODUCTION:

- I. This morning we're going to continue our study entitled OUR LIFE TOGETHER, as we take a closer look at the subject of BIBLICAL FELLOWSHIP.
 - A. Our study up to this point has focused on a number of very important aspects of GENUINE fellowship.
 1. For example, we learned that the NATURE of our fellowship in Christ should be patterned after the kind of close intimacy found in a LOVING, NURTURING FAMILY.
 2. And because we have that kind of close intimacy, we are truly DEPENDENT upon our relationship with Jesus Christ, AND our relationship with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.
 - B. Then, in our last lesson, we learned that we have certain FREEDOMS or LIBERTIES in Christ, but WITH those freedoms and liberties there is ALSO a responsibility to USE our freedoms or liberties PROPERLY.
 1. In areas when God has NOT LEGISLATED, but given us the freedom of CHOICE, we are FREE to carry out the commandments of God in ways we think best.

- a. However, we can never FORCE our preferences or opinions on others.
 2. NOR can we EXERCISE our freedoms or liberties in such a way that they will WEAKEN the conscience of another, or create DIVISION within the body of Christ.
- II. As we explore the FREEDOM and LIBERTY we have in Christ, we are going to see that our relationship together as brothers and sisters in Christ should ALSO be a UNITED FELLOWSHIP.
- A. What do we mean by a UNITED FELLOWSHIP?
1. Simply this: In the body of Christ we have people with various levels of SPIRITUAL MATURITY, various BACKGROUNDS or CULTURES, various TRADITIONAL BELIEFS, as well as various DOCTRINAL BELIEFS – not ALL of which can be supported by the Scriptures.
 2. This naturally creates an atmosphere where PROBLEMS can arise between brethren if we FAIL to properly understand and exercise TRUE BIBLICAL FELLOWSHIP.
- B. So, how can TRUE BIBLICAL FELLOWSHIP exist in the midst of so many differences?

1. The answer lies in understanding and applying the concept of "UNITY" in the family of God.
2. By this we mean taking DELIBERATE steps to RECONCILE DIFFERENCES that can create DISHARMONY, DISUNITY, and ultimately DIVISION.
 - a. And the ONLY WAY we can RECONCILES DIFFERENCES that create DISHARMONY, DISUNITY, and ultimately DIVISION, is to reconcile our differences through a proper UNDERSTANDING and APPLICATION of the WORD OF GOD.

BODY:

- I. To fully appreciate the challenge facing almost ANY CONGREGATION, just take a look at some of our differences.
 - A. In practically ANY CONGREGATION of ANY SIZE, we will find a WIDE RANGE of DIVERSITY among the members.
 1. There are often RACIAL or ETHNIC differences, as well as differences in NATIONALITIES (i.e. Canadian, or American), and with these may come differences in CULTURAL TRADITIONS.

2. There can also be differences in what we might call GEOGRAPHIC HERITAGE (some are privileged to have come from the great State of Texas, while others are less fortunate).
 3. There can be differences in POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES (i.e. Republican, Democrat, etc.)
 - a. And because of this, some may be politically conservative, middle-of-the-road, or even liberal.
 4. There are frequently differences in ECONOMIC STATUS (i.e. poor, middle-class, or wealthy), AS WELL AS differences in LIFESTYLE (i.e. simple, verses extravagant).
 5. There can also be differences in SECULAR INTERESTS, such as sports, hobbies, pastime activities.
- B. For the most part, these differences don't pose a threat to the peace and unity of the body of Christ.
1. And the solution for dealing with these differences is rather simple.
 - a. **James 2:1** – *My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality (or "with respect of persons" – literally meaning to "judge the face").*
 - b. In other words, don't judge one another based on superficial differences – before you have a chance to truly get to know that person.

- C. But other differences DO pose a SERIOUS THREAT to the peace and unity of God's people.
1. There are often differences in levels of SPIRITUAL MATURITY.
 - a. This can simply be due to the fact that someone may be a NEW CHRISTIAN, and hasn't had the TIME to grow in their understanding of deeper spiritual truths.
 - b. OR, a lack of spiritual maturity can be the result of SELF-IMPOSED IGNORANCE that comes through never taking time to read and study the Scriptures properly – and the end result is they remain PERPETUALLY WEAK.
 2. There are also differences in how some brethren apply BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES, or how some determine BIBLICAL AUTHORITY.
 3. And THIS can lead to differences among brethren over what SOME consider as important DOCTRINAL ISSUES, while OTHERS may consider these SAME ISSUES to be simply a matter of LIBERTY or CHOICE.
 4. AND there can be differences between brethren over issues that BOTH consider as DOCTRINAL, and where BOTH see the other as being in ERROR.
- D. THESE are the areas where a congregation of the Lord's people face the GREATEST CHALLENGE.

1. So, how do we handle issues where THESE kinds of differences exist?
 2. How can we maintain peace and unity within the body of Christ while there are DOCTRINAL differences between us?
 3. Or is it simply IMPOSSIBLE to have unity while at the same time we struggle with doctrinal differences.
 4. Is the ONLY SOLUTION to DIVIDE – to go our separate ways and establish a NEW CONGREGATION somewhere?
- II. These were some of the same issues facing churches in New Testament times.
- A. But as we take a closer look at the issues facing those brethren, there is ONE OVERRIDING COMMAND that is repeated OVER AND OVER throughout the writings of the apostles.
1. *"KEEP THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT IN THE BOND OF PEACE."*
- B. Let's take a moment to look at several Scriptures together.
1. **Ephesians 4:1-6** – *I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, 2 with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, 3 endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. [WHY?] 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as*

you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

2. **1 Corinthians 1:10** – *Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.*
3. **1 Corinthians 3:1-3** – *And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. 2 I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; 3 for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?*
4. **Philippians 2:1-2** – *Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, 2 fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.*
5. **1 Peter 3:8-12** – *Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; 9 not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that*

you may inherit a blessing. 10 For "He who would love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips from speaking deceit. 11 Let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. 12 For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers; but the face of the LORD is against those who do evil."

- C. And if THIS isn't enough to convince us of the need to maintain unity, consider one of the LAST PRAYERS Jesus prayed.
1. **John 17:20-22** – *"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; 21 that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me."*
- D. UNITY among the Lord's people is NOT AN OPTION, IT IS A COMMAND!
1. We MUST maintain unity. We MUST be of one mind. We MUST all speak the same things. We MUST be of one accord.
 2. HOWEVER, let me make one thing PERFECTLY CLEAR. We must NEVER maintain unity at the SACRIFICE OF TRUTH.
 3. We are NEVER allowed to simply IGNORE SOUND BIBLICAL TRUTH, or in any way COMPROMISE TRUTH just to keep what we call unity.

4. Unity at the sacrifice of truth isn't unity. It's ERROR, and it's a FLAGRANT DISREGARD for the SANCTITY of God's DIVINELY INSPIRED WORD.
- E. Years ago there was a movement among some brethren known as "UNITY IN DIVERSITY."
1. I believe it's possible, and even Biblical, to have "unity in diversity." But NOT the kind of "unity in diversity" THOSE brethren were advocating.
 2. What THEY meant by "unity in diversity" was this:
 - a. They believed as long as we agree on SOME of the BASIC doctrinal teachings of the Bible, we can agree to DISAGREE on OTHERS.
 - b. Therefore, they would accept into their fellowship those with doctrinal DIFFERENCES and PRACTICES because they didn't feel those doctrinal differences were IMPORTANT, nor would they ALLOW those doctrinal differences to be OPENLY DISCUSSED.
 - c. THAT'S simply sacrificing TRUTH to maintain UNITY – or what they CALL unity.
 3. So, what do I mean when I say it's possible, and even Biblical, to have "unity in diversity?"

- a. I believe we can have "unity in diversity" ONLY in areas where God has NOT LEGISLATED or commanded, but has granted us LIBERTY and FREEDOM of choice – AS LONG AS we do TWO THINGS:
 - (1). As long as we never FORCE others to comply with OUR OWN personal beliefs.
 - (2). And, AS LONG AS we NEVER do ANYTHING to offend the CONSCIENCE of a SINCERE brother or sister in Christ.
- b. We'll have more to say on this in our next lesson.

III. But for now, let's see if we can understand what TRUE Biblical unity IS, and how we can ATTAIN it.

A. Let's begin by asking this question: What IS unity?

- 1. To understand what unity IS, we need to know how was the word used in Scripture?
 - a. According to Strong Exhaustive Concordance, the word means: "oneness... unanimity."
 - b. Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon adds: "agreement."
 - c. Vine's Expository Dictionary of NT Words defines unity as simply being: "one."

2. Other words that help define unity are: "accord, harmony, indivisibility, sameness, uniformity, unison."
 3. And, as we have already seen from the SCRIPTURES, unity means: "*being of one mind,*" of "*one accord,*" where we all "*speak the same things,*" and where we are of the "*same mind and of the same judgment.*"
- B. But this raises another question: Is it even POSSIBLE to be of the SAME MIND and of the SAME JUDGMENT over doctrinal issues?
1. The answer is YES!
 - a. The problem over doctrinal differences ISN'T with the BIBLE, it's with US. Somewhere along the line YOU AND I are either MISUNDERSTANDING, or MISAPPLYING what the Bible teaches.
- C. Look at how the church of the FIRST CENTURY maintained doctrinal unity.
1. From the VERY BEGINNING, Christians of the first century maintained faithfulness to the APOSTLE'S DOCTRINE – doctrine given by GOD, through the INSPIRATION of the HOLY SPIRIT, to the APOSTLES.

- a. **Acts 2:42** – And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.
- b. **Romans 6:17** – But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered.
- c. **Romans 16:17** – Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.
- d. **1 Timothy 1:3-4** – As I urged you when I went into Macedonia — remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine, 4 nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith.
- e. **1 Timothy 4:6** – If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed.
- f. **1 Timothy 4:13, 15-16** – Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine... 16 Take heed to yourself and to

the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.

- g. **2 Timothy 3:10a** – *But you have carefully followed my doctrine...*
- h. **Titus 2:1** – *But as for you, speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine:*
- i. **Titus 2:7-8** – *in all things showing yourself to be a pattern of good works; in doctrine showing integrity, reverence, incorruptibility, & sound speech that cannot be condemned...*

D. But what was this DOCTRINE that was so frequently spoken about in Scripture.

1. On a very BASIC LEVEL, the apostle's doctrine included THREE FUNDAMENTAL TRUTHS:

- a. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God (**Acts 2:22; 3:18**)
- b. He died on the cross, was buried in a tomb, and was resurrected from the dead (**Acts 1:22; 2:24, 32**)
- c. And that salvation is ONLY by faith in Him and by being baptized in His name for the remission of sins (**Acts 2:36-38; 3:16**).

2. But in a much BROADER SENSE, the apostle's doctrine included EVERYTHING the apostles taught through their inspired writings – every COMMAND, and every PRINCIPLE.
 - a. **1 Corinthians 4:17** – *For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.*
 - b. **1 Corinthians 11:23** – (Concerning the proper way to observe the Lord's Supper) *For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you:...*
 - c. **Ephesians 3:1-5** – (Concerning the process of inspiration) *For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles — 2 if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, 3 how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, 4 by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), 5 which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets:*

- d. **John 14:26; 16:13-14** – (Jesus promised the apostles they would receive ALL TRUTH) *But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you... 16:13 However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. 14 He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.*
3. Therefore, we look ONLY to the SPIRIT-GIVEN teachings and writings of the apostles for the COMPLETE RECORD of doctrinal truth – in ALL AREAS of faith and practice.
4. And to show that this SYSTEM OF FAITH – this system of DOCTRINAL TRUTH is FINAL and COMPLETE – Jude, the Lord's brother wrote:
 - a. **Jude 3** – ...*contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.*
- E. So, how do we ATTAIN this UNITY – being of the SAME MIND and SAME JUDGMENT – when it comes to DOCTRINAL ISSUES? Allow me to suggest three important KEYS.
 1. First, we have to all use the same STANDARD OF TRUTH.

- a. **Philippians 3:15-16** – *Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. 16 Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind.*
 - b. The RULE – the STANDARD OF RIGHT AND WRONG – must be the SAME for EVERYBODY.
 - c. Have you ever played a board game or some other kind of game with someone who had their OWN RULES for how the game should be played? It get's a little frustrating.
 - d. But while we might be able to get away with our OWN RULES when it comes to a GAME, we can't make our OWN RULES when it comes to the WORD OF GOD.
 - e. We either play by GOD'S RULES, or we find ourselves a RULE-BREAKER in the eyes of God.
2. Second, to truly UNDERSTAND God's rules revealed in Scripture, there are FOUR THINGS we must know.
- a. We must RECEIVE the Word with all READINESS (OPENNESS) of mind, and SEARCH the Scriptures.
 - (1). **Acts 17:11** – (Speaking of the Bereans, Luke writes)
These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica,

in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

b. We must HANDLE the Word PROPERLY.

(1). **2 Timothy 2:15** (NKJV) – *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*

(2). **2 Timothy 2:15** (NASV) – *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.*

c. We must avoid TWISTING the Scriptures to fit our OWN preconceived ideas.

(1). **2 Peter 3:14-16** – *...be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; 15 and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation — as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, 16 as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.*

d. We must avoid seeking out teachers who will teach what we WANT to hear.

(1). **2 Timothy 4:2-4** – *Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. 3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; 4 and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.*

3. And finally, we must always remember that ZEAL is NEVER an acceptable substitute for KNOWLEDGE.

a. **Romans 10:1-3** – *Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. 2 For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. 3 For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.*

b. We can be EXTREMELY ZEALOUS about our beliefs, but if we are IGNORANT of Biblical TRUTH, our ZEAL won't matter.

- c. When Paul said they "*have not SUBMITTED to the righteousness of God,*" he used a word that simply meant they have not SUBJECTED themselves to be OBEDIENT to God.
- d. Furthermore, their IGNORANCE couldn't be used as an EXCUSE. Ignorant or not, they were STILL DISOBEDIENT and LOST.

CONCLUSION:

- I. You would THINK that as much as we LOVE and CHERISH the Word of God, and as FAMILIAR as we are with the New Testament, we would be a people characterized by UNITY.
 - A. But the sad TRUTH is this: We are a DIVIDED people.
 - 1. The body of Christ has been WRACKED with division over dozens and dozens of issues that have LITERALLY FRAGMENTED the people of God.
 - 2. These heart-wrenching divisions have created so much DISTRUST and ANIMOSITY that many groups have simply written off others and no longer even consider them brothers and sisters in Christ.
 - 3. Fellowship has been severed, and virtually all lines of communication have been broken – we don't even TALK to one another anymore, let alone LISTEN to one another.

4. As I've said before, we have even gone so far as to TAG one another with Demeanings and DEROGATORY LABELS such as LIBERAL, or ANTI, or APOSTATE, or LEGALISTIC and PHARISAICAL, or FALSE TEACHER.
 5. And what is MOST sad about all this is we've come to the point where we ACCEPT division and disunity as a fact of life – we've simply stopped trying to do anything to bring about UNITY among the people of God.
 6. Brethren, ALL THIS needs to CHANGE.
- B. Listen once again to the PLEA of the apostle Paul.
1. **Ephesians 4:1-3** – *I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, 2 with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, 3 endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*
 2. Unity in New Testament times never came at the sacrifice of TRUTH.
 3. Rather, unity came when brethren were willing to sit down together, and *with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, and bearing with one another in love*, they opened their hearts and their minds, and they searched the Scriptures together.

4. But we can't sit down and search the Scriptures together when we allow walls to stand between us.
 5. We need to first tear down the walls, and then reach out to our estranged brothers and sisters in Christ to let them know it's time to heal the wounds and begin taking steps toward becoming *perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.*
- II. What's your attitude toward UNITY in the body of Christ?
- A. Are you doing all you can to establish and maintain TRUE Biblical FELLOWSHIP?
1. Do you genuinely care for and nurture your brothers and sisters in Christ?
 2. Are you doing all you can to avoid offending the conscience of a sincere brother or sister in Christ?
 3. Are you growing and maturing as a Christian as that you can be a source of strength and encouragement to others?
- B. That's what FAMILIES do – they care for, nurture, protect, strengthen and encourage one another.
1. And I've said over and over again that THIS congregation is SO BLESSED because we ARE FAMILY.

2. We DO care for, nurture, protect, strengthen and encourage one another.
 3. Let's make certain we NEVER allow disunity, disharmony and division to destroy OUR family.
- C. If you're here this morning and you're NOT a part of THIS family, we would LOVE for you to become a part of OUR FAMILY in Christ this very moment.
1. If you've never obeyed the gospel...
 2. Or, if you've wandered away from the family of God and want to come back...