

# Guarding Unity of the Flock

by Colin Anderson

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*Colin Anderson emphasizes the importance of guarding the unity and harmony of the local church through biblical principles and the work of the Holy Spirit.*

**Duration:** 28:34

**Scripture:** Proverbs 18:13, Ephesians 4:2-3, Philippians 2:3-4, 1 Timothy 4:12, 1 Peter 5:2-4

**Topics:** "Local Church"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the importance of unity and harmony in the local church. He begins by using the analogy of an orchestra in the pit, highlighting how they are unified under the direction of a conductor. The speaker then turns to Acts chapter 4, where the early believers faced opposition but remained united in prayer. He emphasizes that shepherding God's sheep is a difficult task, but with the help of the Holy Spirit, it is possible. The speaker concludes by distinguishing between unity and harmony, explaining that harmony is achieved when believers have the same mind and are equal in soul. He also acknowledges the tendency to rely on human effort rather than true dependence on the Lord, and encourages believers to prioritize prayer and seeking God's guidance in maintaining unity and harmony in the local church.

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## Transcript

The topic of this conference is the greatest work on earth, building a local church. My subject is to be guarding the unity and harmony of the local church. It seems to me that we must have some method in coming to a topic like this.

We need to look at it biblically, realistically and practically. Looking at it biblically, we need to ask where the Lord wants us to be. That is, as revealed in his word.

Looking at it realistically, we have to ask where are the churches now? And in doing that, we're looking at the present scene. And very practically, we want to ask what can we do to promote revival in reference to unity and harmony? I must utter a word of warning. Our present understanding of God's purpose or standard is low.

It's that which is derived from our own observation or our own experience in various churches. Or it's what goes on in this congregation or that congregation. Therefore, we must begin by asking, what does scripture mean when it talks about unity and harmony? For a text, I would like to take Paul's words in

Philippians 2 and verse 2. He says, make my joy complete by being of the same mind.

Maintaining the same love, united in spirit and intent on one purpose. In the light of that, let us ask, where does the Lord want us to be, in reference to the matter of unity and harmony? Perhaps we need to ask, what do we mean by unity? Or what does the Bible mean by unity? The word is derived from a Greek one, meaning simply one. Not here in a numerical sense as one coin, one coin of ten, that the woman lost one, you remember, and she hunted until she found it.

She wanted that one coin. We're not looking at the word in that way. But as it's used in Mark 11, the Lord our God is one Lord.

Or in John 10, there shall be one flock. And John 17, you remember, the Lord prayed that they may be one as we are one, or made perfect in one. Again in Romans 12, we read, having many members in one body.

Or again, we being many are one in Christ. Unity must not be confused with uniformity. We have two ears, each of us, two eyes, two hands, two feet.

They resemble each other, for a human body has many diverse members, yet is one. Let us read what it says in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, beginning at verse 12. For even as the body, that is the human body, is one, and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ.

For by one spirit we are all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free. And we were all made to drink of one spirit. For the body is not one member, but many.

If the foot should say, because I'm not a hand, I'm not a part of the body, is it not for this reason any the less a part of the body? And if the ear should say, because I am not an eye, I'm not a part of the body, it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? And if the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them in the body, just as he desires. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now there are many members, but one body. When you came to this conference, and you were driving, perhaps your feet were either on the accelerator or the brake, your hands were on the wheel, your eyes, I hope, were on the road.

But each of your members combined and cooperated with one goal in mind. That's not difficult to understand. Your body is an example of organic unity.

You are one. Now those who have faith and believe God's word know that this is true of the local congregation. So unity must not be confused with uniformity.

We're not all the same. Secondly, unity must be understood as being a unity of nature. That is, it's something that should come naturally to us as spiritual persons.

Now if we don't see this, we will regard it as something that is impossible to attain. With the diversity of gifts that we have, with the differences of personality that exist in a local church, it is impossible to have unity and harmony, we will say. And we will always look at it that way, unless we see that the unity we have is really possible, because it is our nature to be one.

God has constituted us that way by putting us into the body of Christ. When each believer walks by the help of the Spirit of God, there will be unity. Romans 12:13 makes that very clear.

For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, and thus to be walking in disharmony is unnatural for a saint. Not only is unity not to be confused with uniformity, and not only must it be understood as being a unity that is natural to us when we're walking spiritually, it must be seen as something that is distinct from compromise. That's nothing better than what is experienced in a worldly organization.

Now in Acts chapter 15, and perhaps we should turn to that in Acts chapter 15, we notice there in the 15th chapter that it describes the most serious doctrinal threat to the church. Now please notice that the brethren concerned with maintaining unity and harmony went first of all to the source of the problem that was existing, they went up to Jerusalem. And then notice that the apostles and the elders, the responsible brethren, met first.

That's not a public debate at that point. And then they sought the Lord's mind. They were not looking for that which would satisfy either one or the other, the majority or the minority.

They were seeking together the mind of the Lord. Now the factors which brought about unity in this chapter, notice verse 7. The first factor is Peter's testimony to the work of God among the Gentiles. Peter stood up and said to them, Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

So first of all, you notice that Peter gives testimony to God's work, and he also refers to the seal of the Holy Spirit upon that ministry. God, he says, who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he also did to us. Then added to that was the testimony of Barnabas and Saul in verse 12.

The multitude kept silent. They were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. And they heard too, you see, about the seal of God upon that ministry, the signs and wonders that were done.

Thus they got the facts straight. Everything was clear and understood. They got the facts right.

Then they discovered that all that had happened was in line with the word of God. Verse 15. And with this the words of the prophets agree, says Peter, just as it is written.

Now notice something from this. Only when the Lord's authority as expressed in his word is accepted by all as being final, only then was there unity. Let's recap a bit.

Unity is not frustrated by the great variety of gifts in the body. That's the way God designed the body to be. Secondly, it's superior to any regimentation.

It does not destroy individual talent. Thirdly, notice it's the natural outcome of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. And finally, it is never attained at the expense of scriptural principles, but it is the outcome of all becoming subject to the Lord and to his word.

Is there any difference between unity and harmony? We were told that our subject is guarding the unity and the harmony of the local church. What is harmony? There are three Greek words that express this idea. The first suggests that which is equal, or equal of soul.

The second speaks of the same mind. And the third suggests the same thing. Each of these, in the King James Version, is translated like-mindedness.

Unity is the product of the Holy Spirit at work within the hearts of believers. And harmony results from submission to the directions of the law. Let's think of an orchestra for a moment.

Here are the various players seated in the pit before the stage. The orchestra is settled there. They're in unity in the pit, but they're in harmony when they come under the direction of the conductor.

Perhaps we should see a biblical illustration of unity and harmony. And we turn to Acts chapter 4 for that, and verse 23. It says, And when they had been released, they went to their own companions, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.

And when they heard this, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, O Lord, it is thou who didst make the heaven, and the earth, and the sea, and all that is in them, who by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of our father David thy servant did say, Why did the Gentiles rage, and the people devise futile things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. For truly in this city they were gathered together against thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint, both herald and conscious pilot, along with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, to do whatever thy hand and thy purpose predestined to occur. And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that thy bondservants may speak thy word with all confidence, while thou dost extend thy hand to heal, that signs and wonders take place through the name of thy holy servant Jesus.

Now, please notice here that there was a kind of unity brought about by the kings of the earth and the rulers coming together, but we know very well that it doesn't compare in any sense with the unity of which we've been speaking. These people certainly agreed at that moment to accomplish their united purpose, but it was an agreement that was purely temporary. It didn't spring from any constitutional difference in these persons.

They were still the same people after all, and after they'd accomplished their one act in getting rid of the Lord of Glory, they would separate again and go their own political ways. That's certainly not the type of thing we're talking about. A real illustration of unity and harmony is noticed when we look at the disciples.

Notice the spontaneity with which they acted. It's amazing that they come together as one man. They express a unity of life and purpose in so coming together, and they express harmony when they lift up their voice with one accord to the Lord.

This is something spontaneous, not something worked up. It's something that springs from the life that exists in them, and is recognized by them, and they express this when they speak to God in prayer as one person. Now let us summarize this, all that we've been saying.

The standard which we're talking about, the standard that scripture sets before us, is high. It's obviously quite unattainable on the natural level. But brethren and sisters, we're not left to what is natural.

The coming of the Holy Spirit has made possible what to us would be impossible. It is now an expression of our nature when we walk in unity and harmony. But of course it takes exercise of heart.

It demands humility of mind. Unlike the inferior imitations known in worldly societies, spiritual unity and harmony are not attained by compromise, nor does the outworking of the baptism of the Holy Spirit result

in uniformity. In spite of the diversity of gifts, it's possible to be of the same mind, maintaining the same love, to be united in spirit and intent on one purpose.

Now secondly, we must ask, where are the churches now? We've been looking at where we should be, where the scripture would put us, but where are we now? With the help of the late A. W. Tozer, let us spy on the elders meeting in the local congregation. It is opened with a formal prayer, or a season of prayer. After that, says Tozer, the head of the church is respectfully silent, while the real rulers of the church take over.

But anyone, says Tozer, who denies this, bring forth evidence to refute it, and I'll be glad to hear it. Is it not true that brethren invariably assume that they already know what they're supposed to do, and that their only problem is to find effective means to get it done? So, we have plans, rules, operations, and new methodological techniques. These absorb the attention.

The prayer beforehand was for divine help to carry out these plans. An absolute dichotomy exists between the devotional period and the business section. The first has no relation to the second.

Mission boards are the same. They assume the scripturalness of their ends, and ask for help to find ways to achieve them. And I end my quote there.

Now, if what Tozer says is true, in most of the congregations with which we're acquainted, Christ is not really Lord, but Helper. After the devotional, the so-called elders do not think of opening their bible to find out what should be done, or how it should be carried out. In the devotional, that's where we pay lip service to the word of God and prayer.

But it's only oil to make our machine run smoothly. Are we full-timers here today? We're not much better, are we? How did you, how did I prepare for this conference? Was there much prayer before we even gave thought to that part we're called upon to play? I have to confess, I wrote many pages of notes, and in them probably saying some good things, before getting down to the business of calling on the Lord out of a pure heart. Some of those brilliant ideas had to go on the ash heap, others had to be refined.

I confess that true naked dependence upon the Lord is not according to the flesh. What has this got to do with unity and harmony in the local congregation? Everything. Do we not see that it is the place that the Lord and his word have in your life that qualify you to contribute to the unity and the harmony of the congregation? You know, Satan wouldn't love you to think that this unity is promoted by paying too careful attention to God's word.

Now let me come to what we can do to promote unity and harmony in the local church. Like a good many of you, I've been called upon to do lots of marriage counseling. Whenever a married couple comes with problems, I listen to them respectfully, because scripture says, he that answers a matter before he has heard it, it is folly unto him.

And there are details which I need to understand, and with which perhaps I need to be sympathetic. But ultimately you know, and I know, that it all boils down to this, doesn't it? We have to say, at what point in your experience, Ben, did Christ cease to be your Lord in practical terms? When was it, Clara, that you stopped reading your Bible? We know, don't we, that Christian marriage is a triangle with Christ at the apex. We go on to counsel this way.

The more you, Ben, and you, Clara, live in obedience to the word of the Lord, the nearer you will be brought to each other. There is no quickie solution to your problems. The first step, and it is essential, is to bring us, to bring ourselves in line with the word of the Lord.

This will encourage others to do the same, you see. If Ben brings himself in line with the word of the Lord, and does his part, regardless of what Clara does, then Clara will have a powerful lever put under her to move her in the right direction, and God will bless Ben's efforts. And if Clara, on her part, makes it her business to get back to doing what the Bible says, and she fulfills her role as a wife and a mother, that will put a powerful lever under Ben to move in the right direction.

And as both of them move towards the Lord, and his will, and the fulfillment of his word in their marriage, they will be brought closer together. You know, leaving the marriage situation behind, and coming back to local congregations with which you and I have to deal, let me say this. I believe it's we who are workers and elders who must really begin this process.

Then others will be encouraged to follow our example. It's no good looking at our congregation and bringing our hands. Paul said to Timothy, in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and purity, show yourself an example.

And you'll remember Peter said to the elders, shepherd the flock of God among you, not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God, not for sordid gain, but with eagerness. Nor yet is lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving yourselves to be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

Brethren, sisters, we're called to guard the unity and harmony of the flock. It's an awesome responsibility, but it's not an impossible task. We cannot do it by promoting compromise, nor by encouraging or enforcing uniformity.

Unity and harmony cannot be legislated, only encouraged. The sheep cannot be beaten, only exhorted. But they will not listen if we do not provide an example of the lowliness of mind, the meekness of spirit, the willingness to suffer long and to forbear one another in love.

Only as we do these things, as we endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, will we be effective. If we are true elders and workers here today, our charge is not optional. Let me remind you, it comes from the Lord Himself.

He holds us accountable for His people. I'm going to close with an illustration given by the late H. B. Barker many years ago. I will relate it as I have retained it in my memory.

He was speaking of the example of the Lord Jesus, who is described as being both a merciful and faithful high priest. Not one without the other, but both at the same time. Mr. Barker pictured an under-shepherd bringing home the flock in the evening, and giving account to the chief shepherd.

One sheep was missing, and that would not do. The under-shepherd pleaded that he had done all he could to persuade the sheep to come home, but he was stubbornly attracted to a particularly luscious pasture land, and would not join the flock. My friend, said the shepherd, you are called to be faithful.

Bring that sheep home. The under-shepherd went off, and returned two hours later with a badly battered animal. In his anxiety to win the chief shepherd's approval, and in his frustration at the stubbornness of the

sheep, he had beaten it all the way home.

My friend, said the shepherd, you're also called to be merciful. It's a very difficult task, isn't it, to shepherd God's sheep? It's an impossible task on the natural level, but let me remind you of the gracious help of the Spirit of God. Let me remind you this is what the Lord has commanded us to do, and let me remind you that the reward is great.

Make my joy, says the Holy Spirit through Paul, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, and intent on one purpose. May God bless this word to your heart and mine.

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