

## Unity

We are on a journey together from Intimacy to Power. We began this journey by making the first commandment first. As we praise and adore God using His names and His character to guide our adoration, we have learned to love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind and all our strength. Our desire to be close to Him has caused us to become more and more like Him. As each of us individually removes hindrances to love, our lives begin to reflect the purity of Jesus. We become a reflection of the character of Christ. We are confident in His love for us and know that He enjoys our fellowship with Him. We are secure in our new identity as Sons and Daughters of God. Intimacy leads to Purity. Purity leads to Unity and Unity will lead to Power. We now explore how Purity leads to Unity.

### Love

As we conform our lives to the scripture and to the image of the Living Christ, we learn to walk in love, for God is love. Our lives come into alignment with His Word and with His heart of love for others. His love for us helps us to love others, even when they act in ways that are unloving. We no longer evaluate situations and relationships based on our own opinions. We try to understand our Heavenly Father's heart for people. We ask Him to show us how He thinks about situations and how He feels about the people involved. I Corinthians 5:16 says:

*Who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?*

*But we have the mind of Christ.*

We find that His thoughts are always filled with love for His world, His people and His church. As we seek to understand the mind of Christ about the situations in our life and to know the Father's heart for His people we find that the wisdom of God is available to us in every situation. As we come into agreement with our Heavenly Father we also come into agreement with one another.

### The Jerusalem Council

In scripture (Acts 15) we find an example of how the early church sought to find unity when the issue of circumcision was causing dissention. First there was time for everyone to express their opinions and share their testimonies of what God had been doing. Then they turned to the written Word as they quoted from the book of Amos. By this time the group was in agreement and James suggested that a letter be written to summarize what they had agreed on and that trustworthy men carry the letter to Antioch and share their decision. By listening, considering the Word and seeking God together the early church discerned the heart of God on this matter. This model has inspired Quaker business meetings. However, unless members of the meeting have purified their own hearts and are truly seeking to discern the Father's heart it is easy to be distracted by our own desires and miss the will of God.

### False Unity

We must be wary lest we fall into the trap of false, humanistic unity. This is a love that focuses on pleasing people rather than pleasing God. Sometimes we are so concerned with making others comfortable and happy that we compromise or ignore sin. God calls us to love Him most and by its very nature, that love is, at times, offensive to others. Jonathan Leeman states the case very well:

*"God's love offends us because the greatest object of God's love is God, not us<sup>1</sup>."*

When the church puts loving God first, there will be times that others are unhappy because they are not the center of attention and they are uncomfortable with the judgments of the Lord. If we make loving others more important than loving God, we will try to avoid this offense and in doing so, compromise our intimacy with God and our purity as a body as we attempt to please people. This may bring a false unity but it does not glorify God. We must be willing to forsake all others and put Him first. Jesus told His disciples, *If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother,*

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Leeman in *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love* (Crossway, 2010) p. 114

*his wife and children, his brothers and sisters,—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.* (Luke 14:26 NIV) Our God is a jealous God and our love for Him must always have first place in our lives. True unity comes when we have agreed together that God will have first place in our corporate life and that we will pursue intimacy and purity even when it is uncomfortable and even if others are offended.

### **Walking in Love**

Instead of this false unity our goal is to glorify God and to reflect His character to the world. God is love and His heart for the world is to show them His love. However, we must seek God to know what love looks like in any given situation. Sometimes love requires that we yield to others or serve them as Jesus did when He washed the disciples feet. Other times it requires confrontation and boldness as when Jesus confronted the Pharisees or cleansed the temple with a whip. Sometimes God intentionally allows difficult relationships in our life so that we can have opportunities to learn to walk in love. We must ask Him questions such as:

How do you see this person or this situation?

What is Your heart for this person?

What is my role to be in this situation?

What are you teaching me through this relationship (or situation)?

And we must be willing to obey as God, who is love, teaches us to love like He does.

### **No room for Fear**

One thing which often separates us from others is fear. We fear rejection or loss of approval. We fear criticism or disagreement. We fear others' power over us and our lack of control. *"There is no fear in love. Perfect love casts out fear"* (I John 4:18). As we mature in love we learn to love each other in ways that reduce our fears and allow us to be vulnerable to one another. However, because our love often falls short of God's perfect love, we do, at times, experience rejection, criticism and disagreement. If we are confident in God's love for us and are touched by His love for others, we can walk in love even in times of conflict. *"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind."* (II Timothy 1:7 NKJV) We need to frequently check our heart motives and replace any trace of fear with confidence in God's great love for us and remind ourselves frequently of His tender love for others.

### **Forgiveness**

Another thing which can separate us from others is unforgiveness. One characteristic of a church that walks in love and unity is that people are quick to forgive and do not hold grudges. If we are to be like Jesus, we forgive quickly and completely. If we are holding in our heart, any unforgiveness, anger, or hurt feelings toward another, our heart is closed and cannot receive the blessings God wishes to give us.

*Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.* Mark 11:24-25 (NIV)

Forgiving someone does not mean that we say their actions were acceptable but it means we let go of our expectations of what that person should have done or of what should happen to them because of their sin. When we are able to let go of our desire for revenge and instead pray blessings for our enemies we know that we are conforming our heart to the image of our loving, forgiving Heavenly Father who forgave us all our sins.

When there is a need to confront the person with their offense we make sure we talk to the right person according to the Biblical model of Matthew 18, taking care not to gossip or slander others and always taking care to check our own heart motives to be sure we are walking in love.

*"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church..."* Matt 18:15-17 (NIV)

## **Humility**

Another characteristic that will be evident in a united church is humility. The Bible has much to say about humility and about its opposite, pride. Proverbs 13:10 (NIV) says: *Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice.* One sure sign of humility is that we are willing to listen to others; to consider their advice and, yes, even accept their words of correction and discipline. Proverbs 11:2 (NIV) says: *When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.* We must humbly depend on God to help us in every area of life. It is in the areas of life where we think we don't need God or others that we are most likely to be blinded by pride. Peter, the bold, courageous disciple felt sure that he would never deny his Lord but his pride gave Satan the right to sift him and he failed the test. Humility will recognize our need for God and for others.

Humility is not ambitious for self-recognition but is concerned for the interests of others. Phil 2:3-4 (NKJV) says: *Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.* Jesus is our example in this. He humbly washed the disciples' feet instead of insisting on the position of honor that He deserved. Instead of seeking those positions that bring honor and recognition we promote others and accept positions of humble service, letting God promote us when the time is right. Everything we do is done to bring glory and honor to Christ and not ourselves.

## **Honor**

Related to love and humility is the concept of Honor. Honoring those in authority recognizes God's sovereignty in placing those people over us. Even when we disagree with them, we honor others by praying blessings for them and by speaking and acting respectfully. Honor and blessing are key components of a right attitude before God and others. A position of honor and respect positions us for God's blessings.

The last words in the Old Testament are a warning and a promise. God warns of judgment but He promises that at the end of the age the Spirit of Elijah (that is the Spirit of Prophecy) will come first and call people back to the place of honoring and blessing others. Mal 4:5-6 (NIV)

*I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.*

God is calling us to honor our fathers (both natural and spiritual) and to bless our children (both our natural children and those under our care either spiritually or in marketplace settings). This brings us into alignment with our Heavenly Father who desires to bless us, His well-loved children.

## **Hearing God's Heart**

As we conform our lives to God's image in love, in forgiveness, in humility and with blessing and honor; it brings us to the place where we can hear God's heart for His church and for His world. We remove the barriers of unforgiveness, fear, self-ambition, pride and disrespect and we become aware that it is not enough to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength but that we must also love our neighbor as ourselves. We recognize that each person is created in the image of God and as we honor that of Christ in them, we love them in the name of Jesus. We become aware of God's concern for the poor and weak among us. We begin to carry His burden for justice and for righteousness. We begin to share His zeal for truth and desire for His Word to be fulfilled in the world. We desire to not only be conformed to His image in our own life but we desire to see the church and the world conformed to His will. As we unite together with others who share this passion for the kingdom of God we enter into a unity of purpose that is God-focused rather than man-focused.

As we share this burden for God's kingdom to come and His will to be done on earth; we draw closer to Him and, in doing so, draw closer to each other. We seek to know His heart for our

church and our community and we become like minded and conformed to His will. We begin to fulfill Paul's prayer:

*Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Rom 15:5-6 (NKJV)*

Intimacy with God leads us to purity of heart. Purity conforms us to the character of Christ. It removes the barriers between us and leads to unity and like-mindedness. We have one mind and one voice and our sole purpose becomes glorifying God.

### **Trinity**

Key to understanding God's desire for unity in the church is understanding the nature of Our God. God is One and yet He is three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – diverse and unique. Because our God is One and yet He has three unique expressions, we understand that the church is to be united but to have many unique expressions.

*A collection of bricks is not unity, but a house is...when our Lord spoke of his disciples as one, he not only expected that there would be varieties among them in character, mind and ecclesiastical preference; but by the very choice of his words he meant us to infer that it would be so... with variety there may be the truest unity...So with the church of Christ.<sup>2</sup>*

One day we will stand before the Throne and before the Lamb, a great multitude of all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues and we will cry out together to our Lord in united worship (Revelations 7:9-12). *"Blessing and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen."* What a glorious time that will be. We taste a bit of that glory on earth when we unite together and worship Him with love, and purity, and united hearts which celebrate our diversity and glorifies Him.

### **ACTS Prayer**

Remember that the ACTS prayer model is an acronym:

**A**doration (Intimacy)

**C**onfession and Proclamation (Purity)

**T**hanksgiving and the **T**able of the Lord (Unity)

**S**upplication (Power)

After our time of Adoration and worship of the goodness of God and after we have Confessed our sins and Proclaimed that we are beloved children who are forgiven and chosen and loved; we are ready to enter into God's presence and sit with Him at the Table of the Lord. This is our time of sweet fellowship and communion with Him. Here we offer Him our thanks for all He has done for us and then we sit before Him to hear what is on His heart. We ask questions to help us understand how He feels and thinks. Our goal is to know God's heart and His mind about the situations and people we encounter each day so that we might bring our hearts and minds into agreement with Him. As our hearts conform to the Father's heart, we become like-minded in our desire to glorify Him in all we say and do.

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<sup>2</sup> F.B. Meyer (1847-1929) quoted in *Steward of Unity*, an article in the NIV Stewardship Study Bible, p1404.

## Questions for Reflection

As we contemplate a difficult situation or person with whom we have a conflict we might ask:

- Lord, what is your heart for this situation or this person?
- How do you feel about it (them)?
- What would you have me do in this situation?
- What is your wisdom for our relationship?

As we consider the injustices in the world we ask questions such as:

- Lord, show me what you are doing?
- How can I partner with you to bring justice and righteousness?
- How do I walk in love instead of in fear or anger?
- What is your wisdom for this situation?

### Group Meeting:

Discuss: When have you had “opportunities to practice love”? What was that like for you? Do you see any things such as false love, fear, pride or unforgiveness that are hindering love or interfering with unity? How do you show honor for those in authority over you? How do you seek to bless those who are under your authority and influence? How do you maintain purity and yet show love in your church?

Choose, together, an issue that concerns your church or community. After a time of Adoration and Thanksgiving, sit at the Table of the Lord and ask God to show you His heart on this issue by asking some of the questions above. Then share together what you believe He is saying.

### Personal Prayer Time:

Pray through the ACTS prayer model starting with Adoration. During Confession, ask God if there is anything that is hindering unity or keeping you from walking in love? Is there anyone you need to forgive? Any fear or worry? Any lack of honor or evidence of pride? Invite God to show you these things. Then confess and obey. Make Proclamations about God’s love for you and then sit before the Table of the Lord and ask Him questions about a situation or person that concerns you. Listen for His response. Journal His response so you can review it later. Thank Him for being with you today.

If you would like help in forming questions to guide your prayer time and verses to guide adoration, you might be interested in *Acts Scriptures: Devotional Prayer Guide* by Robert Fraser. It is available from [www.newgridbooks.com](http://www.newgridbooks.com).

### Family Time:

Talk with your children about what it means to walk in love. Show them this illustration of forgiveness:

*Take a box of tissue. Have one person hold that box. That box represents the person who hurt you. The tissue represents the sin or wrong they did. Another person stands nearby with their arms out like the cross. They represent Jesus’ cross. Explain that the person who sinned and the sin itself are two different things. When you forgive you are telling God that you want Him to take the sin and put it on the cross – take a tissue out of the box and put it in the hand of the “cross” person. You can hate the sin but you must forgive the person. You hate what they did but you don’t hate the person.*

*Remember that God forgives sin and loves the person. God took your sin from you and put it on the cross – take another tissue and put it on the cross. The cross can separate you from your sin so God can love you. You need to do the same thing for others. Separate the sin from the person. You can hate what the person did but don’t hate the person. Forgive the person. Take a third tissue and put it in the hand of the cross person. When you forgive the person, God will deal with their sin<sup>3</sup>.*

When your children have difficult situations, pray with them and ask the Lord questions like these:

- Lord, how do you see this situation?
- What would Jesus do?
- What is your wisdom for this situation?
- What are you teaching us

Listen together and then discuss what you think the Lord is saying.

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<sup>3</sup> This illustration is adapted from an illustration given at a Joan Hunter Conference in Texas, USA, 2009.