

Unity Among Believers

By Mike Worley

What Is the Biblical Standard of Unity?

The standard for unity among believers set by the Scriptures is a lofty one (see John 17). In fact, the unity of the believer is to be like the unity that exists between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A closer look at the statements of Jesus in John 17 gives insights. Here are some observations:

1. The believer is identified with God. *“I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word”* (verse 6).
2. The believer is not of this world. *“They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world”* (verse 16).
3. The believer is sanctified in truth (God’s Word). *“Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth”* (verse 17, also see verse 19).
4. The believer is sent into the world. *“As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world”* (verse 18).
5. The believer has been given the glory of Christ. *“The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one”* (verse 22).

Jesus’ statements in 17:22, *“that they may be one, just as We are one,”* and in John 14:9, *“...He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’”* would indicate it is valid to state “to see one believer would be to see all.” Further examination of unity provides a deeper understanding of this concept.

Thesis

The unity of John 17 is an identification with God, a separation from the world, and a designation for a purpose. The result is the glory of Christ.

What Unity Is

Identification with God

Believers are the people of God (1 Peter 2:9-10). This is an identification that did not exist prior to belief in Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:16). As John 17 states, believers are God’s, given to Christ.

Separation from the World

Biblical unity among believers is to separate from the world. For a hand to be united to one man, it must be separate from a different man. Second Corinthians 6:14-18 emphasizes the separation of the believer from the world.

Designation for a Purpose

The distinction of the believer involves belonging to God and a setting aside for a holy purpose that the world does not have. Jesus reveals God to men (John 17:21). Through this revelation, men can believe in Jesus and be reconciled to God. The believer individually and the body collectively shares in this purpose.

What Unity is Not

Unity Is Not Sameness

Please read 1 Corinthians 12:3-7 and 12-14 for this discussion.

In these passages, a variety of gifts or functions are revealed. Despite the differences, all come from the same source – identification with God. *“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit”* (1 Corinthians 12:4). It is the variations that allow the gifts to support the common good and allow the body to function. This is consistent with John 17. See also Ephesians 2:19-22.

Unity Is Not Togetherness

Insights into what should characterize interactions between believers is provided in Scripture:

- *“So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you”* (Colossians 3:12-13).
- While acknowledging that believers retain a sin nature and can be in error, Colossians 3:16 commands: *“Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”*

These are to be done in a way that builds peace and unity in the body.

The Bible offers two instances where disagreement arose among God’s chosen people.

An Old Testament example is Abraham (known as Abram at the time of the event) and Lot, recorded in Genesis 13:7-12. This was not a difference of truth, but it does offer insight into managing conflicts. Key are verses 8-9: *“So Abram said to Lot, ‘Please let there be no strife between you and me, nor between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me; if to the left, then I will go to the right; or if to the right, then I will go to the left.’”*

When there was no resolution to the strife between the two groups, peace was achieved by separation. This was not in a way that produced bitterness. They started with the goal of being at peace with each other and developed a strategy that achieved it.

A New Testament example is provided in Acts 15:36-41. Paul, Barnabas, and Mark had previously been on a missionary journey in which Mark had left the group. Now they are preparing for a second journey, and Paul and Barnabas disagree on taking Mark along. Verses 39-40 say, *“And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.”*

When the conflict could not be resolved, they separated and each continued doing obedient work for God.

Summary

Christian unity:

1. Is based in identification with God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)
2. It separates believers from the world
3. It is to accomplish God’s purpose.
 - a. So that the world can believe.

- b. As evidence that God sent Jesus.
- 4. Believers are part of the body but unique within that body.
- 5. Admonishment does not violate unity, but there are guidelines by which it is to be accomplished.
- 6. If someone is identified with God, separate from the world, and involved in the accomplishment of His purposes, peace should be sought with that person, even if it is achieved through separation.

God desires unity within the body of believers that is the same as the unity between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each believer contributes to the body individually for the purpose of revealing Christ to the world. Believers retain a sin nature that requires correction (admonishment) and may require separation to achieve peace so that each individual is able to carry out the mission God has given. As Christians, this is how we should live individually and collectively.