

The Key to Unity in the Church

The story is told of a church in the Northeastern United States that had a disagreement over where the piano should be placed in the sanctuary. “Some felt that the music sounded better when the pianist played next to the wall to the left of the pulpit. Others were convinced that the right side of the auditorium was the best acoustical choice. So they began experimenting with the piano placement, moving the instrument around from week to week. Both sides were convinced they were right. Soon members of each faction were racing each other to the building on Sunday mornings to see that the piano was “properly” placed before the service started. People began showing up earlier each week, trying to beat the other group to the piano. One day the disagreement culminated in a physical tug-of-war. Members arrived to find the piano standing in the middle of the sanctuary with a handful of people on either side shouting, arguing and pulling with all their might toward opposite walls” (From: *War in the Pews*).

Throughout more than 20 years of ministry, I have talked with many pastors who have experienced the pain of disunity in their congregations. Sadly, in most cases, the root causes of these dissensions were not issues of orthodox teaching or obedience to God’s commands. Petty differences have disrupted the fellowship of these congregations.

Of course, disunity is not a recent problem for the Church. During New Testament times churches divided over leaders, traditions, economic differences, racial tensions and other matters. Yet the differences that exist between Christians do not need to be an obstacle to church unity. Our responses to these differences and conflicts is what matters.

The key to unity in the Church is not the removal of all conflict. This will only happen in heaven! The key is a reconciling spirit in the hearts of God’s people. Church leaders should teach people to handle differences in a mature and godly way. Since God reconciled us to himself at great cost, we should highly value reconciled relationships among God’s redeemed people.

We are commanded to work hard to protect the unity of the Church (Ephesians 4:3). This is a non-negotiable requirement for all believers. Among other things, this means that selfishness and petty bickering *must not* be allowed among God’s people.

The apostle Paul ordered an early congregation to, “Do all things without complaining and arguing” (Philippians 2:14). Just as parents should not allow such behavior in the family, pastors should require the right attitudes from church members (see: I Peter 3:8-9). Those who insist on being antagonistic and divisive should be dealt with firmly, and, if necessary, removed from the church (see: “Antagonists in the Church”, Kenneth Haughk).

Too often, disunity results from debates over matters of personal preference. Therefore, it is important for members to learn how to distinguish their preferences from the clear commands of God. A preference is one option in a series of options, none of which is *explicitly* wrong according to Scripture. It is an area of behavior where scripture does not *clearly* command or forbid a certain action.

When we elevate our preferences to the status of command, we wrongly threaten the unity of the church. When we reduce commands to the status of preference, we threaten the purity of the church. However, where Scripture outlines general commands like, “Be holy in all your behavior” (I Peter 1:15), or “Do not be conformed to the world” (Romans 12:2), we must guard against treating our applications of these commands as binding upon all Christians.

In matters of preference, we need to demonstrate flexibility, and show deference to others (Romans 12:3; 14:3). Those who demand that the church conform to their preferences should be corrected for their selfish attitudes. A church capable of understanding and applying these distinctions will be able to maintain stronger unity.