

Unity of the Spirit:
The Indispensability of Heart Unity in Public Worship

Harley J. Schwartz

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Introduction

“Behold how very good it is, a pleasant thing to see, when brothers join to live as one in peace and unity”¹! While the unity of the brothers is indispensable in all aspects of church life, it is most significant in public worship. There the presence of love and unity is sweetest, and its absence most bitter, as it is the covenanted family gathering of Christ’s church. This paper will explain what is unity, its importance in public worship, why it is important, the devastating ramifications of division, and ways to promote unity.

What Is Unity

Biblical unity in the church is the internal bond of fellowship, rooted in covenanted mutual love, that Christ’s people have with one another. There must be love, as the second greatest commandment is to love one’s neighbor as himself; and only those who love in this way can love in a covenant way. Second, love is not external action, but an internal bond, as the soul of Jonathan was knit to David, from which love he covenanted with David (1 Sam. 18:1, 3). Jonathan risked his own political opportunities for the sake of this bond, and David returns it by caring for Jonathan’s son. Believers are likewise in a covenanted love with one another, as believers are mutual members of the New Covenant. The RP Testimony confirms in its introduction, section 6, the corporate (thus public) witness of this covenant: “The covenant people are bound to one another in their Head, Jesus Christ. They are children of the covenant bearing witness corporately to His lordship over every sphere of their life”². Believers are bound

¹ Linda Au Parker, ed., *The Book of Psalms for Worship* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown & Covenant Publications, 2009), 133A. Punctuation changed for flow.

² “Testimony,” in *The Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown & Covenant Publications, 2017), Introduction, 6. Electronic copy.

and dedicated to love one another not only by natural law, but by covenant, and the whole way of life is expected to honor this covenant. One must remember though the covenant does not begin man-to-man—it begins with God reaching out to man. As God has covenanted with His church and has spared nothing in seeking the church’s well-being (Rom. 8:32) and uniting them to Himself through Christ, so the people of God are commanded to love one another and to be one.

How does this apply to public worship? God covenanted with man, and he gave man the privilege of coming before Him in public worship—something which covenanted sinners ought to be infinitely thankful for. Therefore, it is imperative that as we ourselves are welcomed and accepted in public worship, that we welcome and accept all others whom God has invited by covenant to His worship. Furthermore, all second table commandments stem from the first table, and the second table must be obeyed in order to honor the first table (Mt. 9:13). There is no more manifest expression of the believers’ love to God than the public worship. Therefore, second table heart unity is indispensable to true God-honoring public worship. Therefore, whatever exhortations to love and unity are given in Scripture, will always apply most strongly in public worship. Also, as stated by the Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 151, sins are more aggravated “From circumstances of time and place: if on the Lord’s day, or other times of divine worship; or immediately before or after these...”³.

The next part will give instances of the inseparable tie of heart unity and acceptable public worship.

³ William Young, ed., *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Edition* (Philadelphia, PA: 1851), WLC 151. Accessed via Logos Bible Software.

The Scriptures Assume Unity – Two Passages

Psalm 133

The psalm connects the blessing of God in public worship with the unity of the brothers. It is clear that this pertains particularly to public worship, because the dew of Hermon falls upon Mount Zion, the place where Jerusalem was stationed, and the Temple was present; there, the Lord commands His blessing. The inference is that where there is not this dew—in this case, brotherly love—there is not blessing. Furthermore, oil being the symbol of the Holy Spirit, and being connected to unity, it is implied that where unity is absent, the Spirit’s blessing is absent. How would Aaron ever be effective if there is no oil of the Holy Spirit? While unity is blessedly sweet, its absence is bitter. When unity is absent, God has withdrawn.

Hebrews 2:12

Christ says, “I will declare Your name to My brethren; In the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to you”⁴. The word for assembly is ἐκκλησία, the word used for church gatherings in the New Testament. In this context Christ declares and praises the glory of the Father. It is clear that this refers to public worship. Now, who is Christ with? His brothers. This word “brothers” was used throughout the Old Testament to describe the close kinship that the people of Israel should have with one another. There was a particular bond of love and unity incumbent upon them which they did not share with outsiders, for which reason no foreign king was to rule over them (Dt. 17:15), and for which reason the Prophet would come from among them (Dt. 18:15). “Brother” is a family term; if anyone exceeds this bond of love, they are a friend among friends

⁴ NKJV. All quotes are NKJV unless otherwise stated.

(Prov. 18:24). All those in covenant with Christ who gather in worship are brothers in a spiritual family. Not only this, but they are brothers coming before their common Father.

The designation of brothers puts an end to strife. When Abram and Lot could not peaceably settle on how they would share the land, Abram says to Lot in Gn. 13:7, “Please let there be no strife between you and me... for we *are* brethren.” Abram then proposes a peaceable solution where he condescends to let Lot have the first pick, and he himself takes what is left over. The family bond was reason to quell the argument as quickly as possible, even if it meant taking a less than ideal share. If this was incumbent upon Abram and Lot by nature, much more is it incumbent upon the people who are brothers in Christ; much more in public worship, when they all come together before the Father.

Christ Prayed and Died for Unity

Christ in John 17 makes many petitions for His disciples pivoting on oneness. In v. 12 He asks the Father to keep them through His name “that they may be one as *We are*”. In v. 20 His prayer for all who will believe in Him through them “may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent me”. In v. 22 Christ gives them His glory “that they may be one just as *We are one*”; in v. 23, “that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent me”.

Christ gives the desired intensity of this oneness: “as we are” in v. 12, “just as *We are one*” in v. 22. The love and unity of the Father and Son (union in essence excepted) is the example that believers are to aspire to. Christ’s concern is that, of all things which would be broken by the world, devil, and sin, that their oneness would be broken, v. 11. Christ is also concerned about the poor witness should the oneness ever be broken, v. 20. It was Paul’s own

aspiration that when an unbeliever comes in, that even in their hard-heartedness they would be forced to acknowledge that God is in their midst (1 Cor. 14:25), which will not be the case where unity is broken. A terrible danger to the cause of Christ, is lack of this expressed and visible unity.

The Gospel Demands It

Love and unity are consistent with the Gospel, and anything else is a denial. “Brethren, I write no new commandment to you, but an old commandment... Again, a new commandment I write to you, which thing is true in Him and in you... He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now” (1 Jn. 2:7-9). The commandment is to love one another, as John says in 3:11 that the message heard from the beginning is “that we should love one another...”. The commandment for man to love his fellow man has been there since the Garden, and it has always been a core principle to the Law of Moses (Lev. 19:18). Now, upon the death of Christ, the old commandment is a new commandment, having new power, life, urgency, because of the immense demonstration of love in the cross.

If Christ could pray from the cross, “Father, forgive them” (Lk. 23:34), who is it that, being forgiven so much, dares to hold a brother hostage over pocket change worth of offense (Mt. 18:21-35)? It is a very denial of the Gospel that is to be preached in the public assembly. Rather, believers are to freely love, freely forgive, and be one. This is part of the lordship to be witnessed publicly according to the RP Testimony, as referenced earlier.

The Elements Assume It

Is it possible for the church to work cohesively when there is a lack of love? No.

Consider what happens to the administration of elements when there is lack of unity.

Preaching is hindered by lack of unity. The Gospel is a Gospel that destroys enmity and creates peace between God and estranged persons (Rom. 5:1 & 10, Eph. 2:14-17), and unites persons of all races and all stations in life (Gal. 3:28). The Gospel unites all families of nations into the same body, the church, to worship the Lord, as all kingdoms belong to Him (Ps. 22:27-28). Disunity between preacher and people, or member and member, will nullify a sermon outright in a congregation where people have “canceled” one another for frivolous reasons.

Singing is hindered by lack of unity. In fact, it becomes repulsive. Who can rightly sing Psalm 22:22 about declaring the glory of His Savior’s redeeming work when he holds others at a distance? How could they sing Psalm 133 in any good conscience? It takes no genius at all to perceive the incongruity.

Prayer is hindered by lack of unity. Jeremiah Burroughs admonishes against heart cruelty to brothers from the Lord’s Prayer where one prays that God would forgive their debts, just as they have forgiven others⁵. No pastor can sincerely pray this with a divided heart, and no congregant can say “Amen” with a divided heart. Can the Lord hear this and be pleased?

The Lord’s Supper, in a way unlike others, is hindered by division. In the bread and wine are the signs of Christ’s death and resurrection by which this free grace salvation is sealed to us; in which Christ grants continuing grace despite a believer’s remaining sins; in which Supper the one who gave Himself comes to be with His people in a unique way.

⁵ Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Worship: Worship Worthy of God*, ed. Don Kistler (Grand Rapids, MI: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990), 120-121.

The reasons go deeper. The Reformed church has historically acknowledged the communal aspect of the Lord's Supper. Hughes Oliphant Old summarizes Calvin in saying that, at the Table there is not only communion with Christ, but communion with one another. It was the Reformers who brought back the idea of communing with one another at the Table. The Supper shows that believers are members of a covenant community. Interestingly, Psalm 133 has been a favorite to be sung in a communion service in the historic Reformed tradition⁶.

Hughes Old also draws attention to the Reformed view of this sacrament as a meal. As he says concerning Abraham's meal with Melchizedek, and with the three men who came to visit him, these meals were to seal the relationship of those who shared it. He then argues from the communal aspect of the Passover that the Lord's Supper too has a real communal aspect. Just as one identified as an Israelite brother by partaking of Passover, one shows himself to be a New Covenant brother by partaking of the Lord's Supper⁷. Although churches will differ on what is an acceptable mode of practice, it is historic Reformed theology to see the Lord's Supper as a public exercise of communal unity and love.

These are only a few examples, but it should be plain from the nature of public worship and the content of the elements that unity is necessary for maximal benefit, and division will rob participants of the benefits.

⁶ Hughes Oliphant Old, *Guides to the Reformed Tradition: Worship*, ed. John H. Leith and John W. Kuykendall (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1984), 110, 126, 135, 142.

⁷ Old, *Worship*, 103-105, 110, 141. He does hold that the communal aspect is even better represented when using one loaf of bread, one common cup of wine, with all participants seated at one table; and he indicates this was a historic practice of those who adhered to the Westminster Directory for Public Worship.

The Hindrance of Division

What is division? It is a heart disposition which works against this covenanted love, making it unpracticable to perform duties toward one another in a spirit of love⁸. Although division and disunity will not always be open, it can be sensed. One may not smell radon, but they truly feel the poisonous symptoms. The Holy Spirit perceives it, and may even quietly withdraw in chastisement, and a congregation becomes like Samson, unaware that the Spirit had left him (Jdg. 16:20). For this, and many other dreadful effects, division must be cured. James Durham in his work *Concerning Scandal* list several dangerous effects of the scandal of division⁹:

- In times of persecution, the church helps its enemy by fighting itself.
- Division opens a church to heresy.
- Division makes the ordinances contemptible.
- The next generation will be the heirs of today's division.
- Division, once present, is difficult to heal (Prov. 18:19).

What is the sum effect on the assembly? In times of difficulty the bond of love will not be strong enough to hold the body together. If a group of persons is separated out from those who have more discernment, the devil may insert strange doctrine into their minds. People begin to associate public worship and gatherings with coldness, verbal scuffles, and bad memories, and may question the practical use of attending at all. Whatever happens in the way of splits,

⁸ There is in here some influence of John Owen, *Of Schism: The True Nature of It Discovered and Considered with Reference to the Present Differences in Religion*. (Oxford: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1657), <https://ccel.org/ccel/owen/schism/schism.i.i.html>. Accessed February 21, 2023. However, it is difficult to ascertain where in his work the elements were picked up; most likely chapters 3 and 4.

⁹ James Durham, *Concerning Scandal in General, Public Scandals, Scandalous Errors, & Scandalous Divisions*, eds. Chris Coldwell and David C. Lachman, Ph.D. (Dallas, TX: Naphtali Press, 2008), sec. 4: Introduction and ch. 9. Kindle edition. Citation only applies to bulleted listing.

factions, party spirits, or grudges, it will carry on for a long time, and for centuries after may not be healed¹⁰. It certainly cannot be what Christ has in mind when He prayed in John 17:22, “that they may be one just as We are one”.

How to Promote Unity, and Prevent Division

Pastors and elders act first. The members of Session should be peaceful, non-quarrelsome men (1 Tim. 3:3). They must address matters faithfully, even sternly if necessary, but there should be moderation of passions at all times and in all situations, all from sincere love. This is not required of the Session only, but they set the tone (1 Tim. 4:12).

Second, a church must take seriously that they cannot have the blessing of the Spirit without the unity of the Spirit and without the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3). Paul is clear on what this means: walking in lowliness and gentleness, being longsuffering with one another, bearing with one another in love, striving to keep this Spirit and bond (Eph. 4:1-3). These are indispensable to walking worthy of our calling. It is an every-member initiative. No one should gloss these over as a generic list of ideal behaviors: they are barometers of whether the Spirit is, and to what degree He is operating, in a church, and whether God even wants the worship (Mal. 1:8).

Consider that once division is entertained, it will be difficult—at times impossible—to repair the breach. Grudges, suspicions, bad reports, and many things like them stay lodged in the mind not days or weeks or months, but years (Prov. 18:8). Therefore, it must always be killed at the very first motion. One must either let the perceived offense go and refuse to ever let their

¹⁰ For one example, look how old is the breach between the eastern church and the western church. Another example is, many Baptists today are resistant to Paedobaptism not only on theological grounds, but persecutions which have happened on the American and European continents. These are only a few examples.

fellowship be tainted by its memory, or they must go and work out the difference so that love and unity may be restored.

Finally, remember the Gospel. Brothers and sisters will sin against one another. Sometimes they will sin grievously and terribly, and perhaps trust rightly cannot be fully restored. Still, nonetheless, all church members may pray like Christ did: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Lk. 23:34). If Christ could respond this way to the persons and crowd who were guilty of putting him on the cross, then who has business holding a brother hostage for sins, blemishes, or irritations which most likely are not done maliciously?

Conclusion

Nothing is more precious than brotherly love in the assembly, and nothing is so grievous as its absence. Scripture assumes that those in public gatherings will be one, so that they may benefit from the ordinances. Where there is not unity, the ordinances will not be effective. Christ died and prayed that the church may be one, and His own Gospel came to tear down the greatest division of all—between God and man. Among those whom God has saved, He has made them brothers of Christ, and His own sons and daughters. For all these reasons should the unity and love of brothers and sisters be most evident in the public assemblies, that the wicked may profess that God is among His people. If one will hold a brother or sister hostage in their affections, it is not only themselves whom they injure, but they may grieve the Spirit, repel his influence, and like Achan hold a congregation hostage against the blessing of God. Therefore, let the church buy this precious unity, a pearl of great price, and sell it not.

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