

Antidote For Disunity!

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Given 16-Oct-19; Sermon #FT19-03

God created a world dependent upon connection. Words and musical notes, all must connect before they are useful to humans. Most importantly, we—God’s children—were created to connect. Connectedness is necessary for our own sense of identity. Loneliness is painful partially because it alienates us from ourselves.

Being without authentic human contact does to our minds what oxygen deprivation or starvation does to our bodies. God created us with obvious physical needs, but He also created us with spiritual needs. Connectedness with others is one of these needs and being deprived of this harms us just as surely, though perhaps not as quickly, as deprivation of oxygen or food.

Perhaps you felt a subtle difficulty at summoning up feelings of happiness recently. Or, perhaps you felt a little depressed and could think of nothing about which you could be happy or for which you could feel grateful. The most likely explanation is insufficient genuine connection with God, but also with other human beings.

Genuine connection was first achieved in that most perfect of all places, the Garden of Eden. After God said in Genesis 2:18, “It is not good for man to be alone,” He solved the problem by creating Eve. Loneliness ended because Adam and Eve lived together in God’s Garden—an environment of spiritual compatibility.

Sadly, life of spiritual compatibility in the Garden came to an end. Adam and Eve were evicted from paradise, but they were still married and got to spend the rest of their lives trying to rebuild the spiritual support of their relationship.

After driving Adam and Eve out of the garden, God placed at the east of the Garden of Eden two cherubs, “To guard the way of the Tree of Life.”

Now, most translators translate the following as:

Genesis 3:24 So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.

Some mistakenly assume that their purpose was to prevent man from ever reaching the Tree of Life. However, the true meaning of the words is that their purpose was to protect the pathway to paradise. This paradise represents God's way of life—God's truth. So, at that time, Adam and Eve did not have the same access to God's truth that they had earlier while speaking with God face to face in the Garden. So, in a sense, they became unconverted and unable to understand spiritual principles as well as they had before when they were with God Himself. And so, there started what we have today, the people of the world without God's Holy Spirit, without the understanding of His truth.

The pathway to understanding God's truth was blocked unless God personally called a person and gave His Spirit to the person.

Young's Literal Translation (YLT) translates it this way:

Genesis 3:24 (YLT). . . the cherubs and the flame of the sword which is turning itself round to guard the way of the tree of life.

So, they are guarding the way to God's way of life. The Garden of God is the Bible's picture of how God intended human life to be lived. The Garden of Eden is more than a place; it is also more importantly a way of life, which Adam and Eve rejected by eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, that requires a God-centered state of mind. God himself planted the Garden of Eden as a perfect garden—as a paradise.

Harmony is a major characteristic of that Garden. Adam and Eve are pictured as living in harmony with nature, including both plants and animals. They also lived in harmony with each other. But overshadowing this harmony on the natural and human level is the open intimacy of Adam and Eve with God.

When Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden, they lost more than a home; they also lost a spiritual status based on an unencumbered relationship with God.

The Garden of Eden is not a place of absolute retirement, but a place of continuous moral testing, as indicated by the presence of a forbidden tree in the middle of the garden. It is a place of fundamental choice. In fact, we associate the original Garden with the most decisive choice in the history of the world. Dominating our impression as we read Genesis 2 is our awareness that paradise, representing harmony and truth, has been lost.

Adam and Eve are the representative husband and wife, with God instituting marriage and sexual union as part of their garden existence.

Genesis 2:24-25 Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.

The harmony that the couple finds with their environment reflects the harmony of their relationship with each other, until sin enters in and disrupts that harmony—that unity.

This brings us back to what the cherubs guard, and at the same time, point to. In only one other circumstance throughout the entire five books of Moses do we again encounter the two cherubs: they are found upon the gold lid of the Ark of the Covenant in Exodus 25:18 and Exodus 37:7.

Exodus 25:16-22 “And you shall put into the ark the Testimony which I will give you. You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold; two and a half cubits shall be its length and a cubit and a half its width. And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work you shall make them at the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub at one end, and the other cherub at the other end; you shall make the cherubim at the two ends of it of one piece with the mercy seat. And the cherubim shall stretch out their wings above, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and they shall face one another; the faces of the cherubim shall be toward the mercy seat.

You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the Testimony that I will give you. And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the Testimony, about everything which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel.”

The reappearance of the cherubim is the vital clue. Cherubim are the traditional guardians of holy places. How can those two cherubs guide us back to Eden and help us banish loneliness and disharmony?

The avenue back to Eden and the end of loneliness is through the biblical blueprint contained within the ark guarded by the cherubs. The same cherubs that protect the path to Eden also point the way to the five books of Moses within their ark. That source of enlightenment details the shared core beliefs that will allow the children of Israel and the church of God to truly connect. Therefore, the cherubs never appear in the five books of Moses as individuals, but always as a pair of them. They represent the ultimate symbol of friendship and connection.

So, how does this relate to us today in our daily lives? We might have thousands of ‘friends’ on social media and hundreds of friends we meet by our membership in various clubs, jobs, and churches. It is not the quantity of people we know; it is the quality of our connections with them.

Being connected with people of similar outlook is far more important than being connected with people of similar socio-economic level, skin color, or even with similar interests and hobbies.

Religious beliefs are one type of shared outlook and therefore some people feel closer to friends in their “faith families” than they do to their real biological families. Instead of frantically seeking crowds of friends, seek out the few with whom your connection can be spiritually pure. Build spiritual compatibility into your relationships.

Make sure that your connection with your family is not only biological. A church culture that instills core shared beliefs makes for meaningful personal relationships. In all parts of your life, build spiritual bonds of shared ideas

with those you care most about. Unity requires connection! Connection, compatibility, and harmony are all expressive of unity.

Ephesians 4:1-3 I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Bible numbers do not interest many people today. Nevertheless, there is still some obvious truth in the number of times God inspired specific things to be mentioned in the Scriptures which gives added emphasis to what is written. And, this can make Bible study even more interesting and meaningful.

Verses 4-6 deal directly with the unity of the church. It is one sentence to begin with, a fact which is important. Its main characteristic is a sevenfold repetition of the word “one.”

Ephesians 4:4-6 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

There is also a fourfold repetition of the word “all.”

Seven is the number of spiritual unity or perfection; and if four relates to creation, then this seems to indicate that the created order finds its perfection by being joined to God within the church. The message is that in order to be one, all—everyone—must be intimately involved.

So, in order for us to have unity in the church, every last person must be involved. This is a commonsense statement. But, we do not have the unity that we could have in the church, because we are not all one yet.

A Time of War

During the apostle Paul's time, the main danger which threatened the Philippian church was that of disunity. That is the danger of every enthusiastic church. It is when people are really motivated, and their beliefs really matter to them, that their human nature is likely to flare up against each other as they argue over this scripture or that doctrine.

In a sense we have that in a general way among the different church groups that are out there, agreeing and disagreeing on doctrinal issues, which seems more and more divisive. It is sad to see. We are getting farther disunited with other groups. Actually, not we only, but all of the groups: Church of God, A Worldwide Association; Living Church of God; United Church of God; Church of the Great God; Philadelphia Church of God; and so on. As some of the doctrines change, we get farther from each other. But God will unify those who are His, eventually, and at the right time.

The greater the church people's enthusiasm, the greater the danger change that they may collide. It is against that danger Paul wants to precaution his friends. This why in Philippians 2, Paul speaks of a need for close loving relationships among God's people.

Philippians 2:1-4 Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. 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.

Paul speaks of this need for close loving relationships among God's people because it is a matter of unity, and there are two reasons why it is necessary.

The first reason close loving relationships among God's people is a matter of unity is that it is necessary in time of war. We are in a spiritual war. Christians are often besieged by the forces of this world, and we must draw together if we are to defend the gospel successfully and to advance the claims of Christ amid our environment.

That close relationships among believers are necessary in a time of spiritual war is a practical reason that has a broad application.

Isaiah 42:13 The Lord shall go forth like a mighty man; He shall stir up His zeal like a man of war. He shall cry out, yes, shout aloud; He shall prevail against His enemies.

God is long-suffering toward sinners, but when He begins to work, He wastes no time!

As a soldier going into battle stirs up his emotions, God is committed to His victory from the depths of His being. So should we.

The Eternal is often in the Scriptures represented as a hero, or a man of war, or like a mighty man.

Exodus 15:3 The Lord is a man of war; the Lord is His name.

Psalms 24:8 Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.

Close relationships among believers is necessary in a time of war. There must be an “esprit de corps,” that is, common loyalty shared by members of the congregation.

We first must be unified in a close intimate relationship with the members of our immediate congregation, or in the way that the church of the Great God is so spread out, with contact with one another. We must have that fellowship to make sure we have that unity among us.

You hear calls from people on a regular basis, “Why can’t we unify with this group, or that?” Well, if you go to any individual group, you will find disunity. And until there is unity of the Spirit, there is not going to be a unity of the churches of God. So we begin with the unity within ourselves and among ourselves first, in order for that to come about. God will make sure that happens.

There is hardly a problem in the church today that did not exist in some form in the church of the first century Christians. The apostle Paul acknowledged the church in Corinth to be a true church in every respect. In the first verses of I Corinthians, Paul says the Christians at Corinth are “sanctified in Christ Jesus;” they are recipients of “grace,” they are “enriched in every way;” the testimony of Christ is “confirmed” in them, they do not lack any spiritual “gift.” They were a church of God and a people of God. But they were not perfect, were they?

Yet this church was filled with problems. There were divisions. Some people said they were of Paul’s party, others of Peter’s, still others of Apollos’. The sincere ones said they were of Christ.

Second, there is conceit—the desire for personal prestige. Prestige is for many people an even greater temptation than wealth. To be admired and respected, to have a choice seat, to have one's opinion sought, to be known by name and appearance, even to be flattered, are for many people most desirable things.

The Pharisees and scribes were well known for being this type of person.

Matthew 23:5-6 “But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues.”

But the intention of the Christian should be not self-promotion, but humility. We should do good deeds, not so people will glorify us, but so they will glorify our Father in heaven.

James 1:9-11 Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, but the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the field he will pass away. For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beautiful appearance perishes. So the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits.

Both poverty and riches bring enormous pressure on a person to focus on the world rather than on Christ. So, James exhorts the poor to glory in their high status in Christ. The lowly brother will be exalted by God.

In contrast, James exhorts the rich to glory in their humiliation. (1) by realizing that their wealth is temporary and that it gains them no advantage before God, and (2) by identifying with the poor in their affliction.

The church is to be a “countercultural” community, which reverses the values of the world. We should not desire to focus our eyes on ourselves but on God.

Back to Paul, his third point, there is concentration on self. If we are always concerned first and foremost with our own interests, we are bound to collide with others. If everything in life is a competition which we see as an opportunity to beat someone else, we will always think of other human beings as enemies, or at least as opponents, who must be pushed down or pushed out of the way—examples of our unchained human nature.

Concentration on self inevitably means elimination of others; and the object of life becomes not to help others up but to push them down.

Our Relationship to Christ

We know that, although unity is made necessary by the dangers we face, the real reason—the second reason—Paul speaks of this need for close loving relationships among God’s people is because Christian unity lies rather in our mutual relationship to Christ and in what we know of Him. This relationship is eternally lasting.

In the first two verses of Philippians 2, in face of this danger of disunity, Paul sets down considerations which should prevent disharmony.

Philippians 2:1-2 Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.

Paul says that there are four solid legs for Christian unity; introduced by the word “if”: (1) because there is “encouragement,” (2) because there is a “comfort from His love,” (3) because there is a “fellowship with the Spirit,” and (4) because there is an experience of the “mercy and compassion” of Christ. We have all experienced it. This enables us to become unified among ourselves, because if we imitate Christ, we live like Christ, we will have mercy and compassion on one another, automatically encouraging unity.

Because of these four things you and I are to be “like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.” It is because we are members of God’s Family, and we have learned from Him that we must live in peace and unity with one another.

I do not know how many times Scripture emphasizes that, but it is often, repeated over and over again, which means that it is vitally important.

Being human, we will always be tempted to divisiveness in ways that will injure our witness of God’s way of life. But in such situations our natural reactions must constantly be overcome.

The apostle Paul revealingly expressed his own frustration with his battle with his own human nature. This is one of my favorite passages of Scripture. It shows us that Paul, and every other person in God’s church, suffers from the same frustrations, the same battles, and the same challenges.

Romans 7:15-25 For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and

bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.

This is so important to understand that I want to read the same verses from a paraphrase of the same passage—but this time from: *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*.

Romans 7:15-25 (The Message) What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can't be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God's command is necessary. But I need something more! For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge. I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question? The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different.

This is one of the major reasons the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is absolutely necessary in order to overcome the harmful tendencies of our human nature. Furthermore, it enables us to be unified with those who have

the same Spirit in them—that is the key. If a person lives in disunity with other members of God’s church, he thereby shows that the gift of the Spirit is not active in him.

There are constant pressures from sin within Christians. And if they are not resisted, they will eventually destroy Christian unity and render our witness useless, unless they are offset by the power of the Holy Spirit through Christ to produce spiritual fruit such as comfort, fellowship, love, mercy, and compassion.

Have you found these spiritual fruits in your relationship to God? Of course, you have—if you are faithful in Christ. In that case we are also to produce them in our relationships with other Christians.

Encouragement in Christ

The first solid leg on which unity stands, to which Paul points, is encouragement. This encouragement in Christ is the support Jesus gave to His followers to live together in love. Jesus taught that His disciples were to desire the lowest places at the table, giving honor to the other person. He taught that love was to be our highest virtue.

Jesus prayed for all who would believe in Him through the word of His disciples.

John 17:20-22 “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one.”

Some Bible commentaries believe this refers only to a spiritual unity that all believers possess, regardless of their actual deeds and feelings. There is a sense in which all who confess Christ’s name are actually one in Him. But is this what John is describing here? John describes a visible unity, because it is a unity that the world can see and on the basis of which people can come to believe in Jesus Christ. This unity must be expressed in deeds, gestures, and

speech—in short, in the way we think about, talk to, and act with other Christians.

This type of unity is what Jesus desires for us. He encourages us to achieve it and offers to support us in the attempt. If we have difficulty with this, it may be because we are more interested in our own desires than in His requirements.

The fact that we are all in Christ should keep us in unity. No one can walk in disunity with his truly converted brother or sister in God's church and in unity with Christ at the same time. If we have Christ as the Friend of our way, we are inevitably the friend of every saint.

The Incentive of Love

The second solid leg on which unity stands is the incentive of love. Paul knew that Christians are sometimes hard to get along with. But he also knew that Christians have a duty to see more than another Christian's faults. We must also see the person, and we must love him or her with a love that is patterned on the love with which God the Father loves us.

The person who really loves the other Christian in this way will not seek to separate from him because he is cantankerous, or because he sees some minor teaching differently. He will seek to know him, to learn from him, and to help and encourage him spiritually, as together, they mature in God's way of life.

Proverbs 27:17 As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend.

We should all be friends. As you seek to do this, always remember that our love is to be patterned on God's love. In fact, our love is actually to be an outpouring of His love through us as we are transformed by the indwelling presence of His Spirit.

Remember, what Jesus taught His disciples just before His crucifixion.

John 13:34-35 “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

This statement leaves no room for qualification. Our love for other Christians must be like Christ’s love for us.

You are very familiar with this scripture in John 15. And it is interesting because I had this in my notes already, but it was also the comment in The Berean today. It is very interesting that is the case, because to me this reinforces this subject today for us all.

John 15:13-14 “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life [in death] for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.”

Here are John Ritenbaugh’s comments in today’s Berean on this passage:

We like to think of ourselves as rising to the occasion when a time of great crisis arises. We all hope to emulate what the heroes of faith did. But as great as they were, Jesus says here, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you." It is very easy to think of the sacrifice implied in "lay[ing] down one's life" as dying for another in one moment of time. Though that may occasionally occur, the context shows this sacrifice within the framework of friendship. Friendship occurs over months and years, not just in one moment in time.

In true friendships, because we are eager to help, we willingly spend ourselves ungrudgingly, without tallying the cost. Friends open their hearts and minds to each other without secrecy, which one would not do for a mere acquaintance. True friends allow the other to see right in and know them as they really are. Friends share what they have learned. Finally, and most importantly for this

article, a friend trusts the one who believes in him, and risks that the other will never doubt his loyalty but look upon him with proven confidence.

Though the principle given by Christ is applicable to all friendships, He has one specific friendship as His primary focus: ours with Him, or more generally, ours with God. Proverbs 18:24 says, "A man who has friends must himself be friendly, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." That friend is Jesus of Nazareth, but He made it very clear that if we are His friends, we will show it in our obedience to His commands. But before we can obey, we must trust Him.

Take a moment to evaluate yourself. Are you as open and frank with Him as He is with us through His Word? Often our prayers are stiff and formal, not truly honest. Besides that, sometimes we become bored in His presence and soon have nothing to say to Him. Is it not true that we do not trust Him as fully as we should? That we are often quick to doubt Him? That we easily grow suspicious of Him? That we lose heart or fear that He has forgotten us? That He is not really trying or is unequal to the task of shepherding us into His Kingdom? Though He has never failed us, we are so quick to suspect and blame Him!

I will ask you a question: Does God cast away the one who offends Him or makes an unintentional doctrinal mistake or sins? On the contrary, His love reaches out even farther as He seeks to draw the sinner to Himself. That love must flow through us, and it must be our pattern. It must be our incentive as we live with other Christians.

The power of Christian love should keep us in unity. Christian love is goodwill which is always pleasant and is the motivation for doing things for the good of others. It is not a mere reaction of the heart, as human love is; it is a victory of the will, achieved by the help of Jesus Christ.

Christian love does not mean loving only those who love us, or those whom we like, or those who are lovable. It means outgoing concern even toward those who hate us, toward those whom we do not like, and toward those who are unpleasant. This is the very essence of a true Christian's life.

Christian Fellowship

The third solid leg on which unity stands, to which Paul points, is Christian fellowship. This is not merely a human fellowship, like the fellowship between friends who have a number of things in common. It is not man-centered.

The fellowship that exists between Christians is a fellowship created by God. It exists, not because we may have a lot in common, but because by grace we have been made mutually dependent members of Christ's body.

This dimension of the Christians' fellowship is taught clearly in the opening verses of I John. After beginning his letter with an exalted confession of the deity of Jesus Christ, John goes on to speak of Christian fellowship.

I John 1:3 That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.

This means that because you have been brought into a vertical fellowship with God by grace there must also be a horizontal fellowship that extends outward to embrace other Christians. You cannot even claim one aspect of that fellowship unless you have the other, because the apostle John goes on to say, still speaking about fellowship,

I John 1:6-7 If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.

Is there someone with whom you are not speaking or a member of your household with whom you are on very bad terms? If that is the case, then according to the authority of these verses, there is something lacking in your own relationship to God. Your lack of fellowship with another Christian is not of God's doing. It is your doing, and it indicates a lack of fellowship with Him.

God's Spirit always has the effect of drawing God's Family together. Producing spiritual fruit with the power of God's Spirit always results in true harmony. And, the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are sown in peace.

This New Life

The account of the early church in the book of Acts shows how men and women become Christians and how they are completely changed so that they are new creatures with the life of God dwelling in them.

This new life immediately expresses itself; it is bound to do so. The moment a child is born, he expresses the fact that he is alive; he moves, he desires food, he cries, and so on. A dummy would not do that, but a live child does.

Life has vitality about it. It involves action. And that is equally true of this new life that is in Jesus Christ. So, everything that Christians are and do is an expression of this new life that is in them. Not necessarily every single action, but the main focus and characteristic of their lives. Or, to put it the other way around, Christians are people who can only be explained in terms of the fact that they have new life in them; that they have the life of God in them. Christ said,

John 10:10 "The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly."

Without Him, we do not have life; we exist but nothing more. He alone gives life.

In considering the ways in which that new life reveals itself, one aspect of the new life is that the first thing men and women do when they become Christians is separate themselves from the world, and we have good reasons for that. To some this seems somewhat negative. But how does this new life manifest itself in a positive manner? It does so in a way that is almost the exact opposite of what people imagine.

Why is it that with an open Bible in front of them, and with a record such as this in Acts, people think instinctively about the Christian and Christianity and the church in a manner that is the exact contradiction of what we find in Scripture, especially in Acts?

The answer is, because of sin. The Bible says that sin binds us to this world. We must separate ourselves from it. It confuses the understanding so that though you put truth before people, they cannot see it.

The ninth commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," protects our relationship with God because by seeking and bearing true witness to the truth, we can have a relationship with God. God is truth, and he who speaks truth from the heart abides with God.

Psalm 15:2-5 He who walks uprightly, and works righteousness, and speaks the truth in his heart; he who does not backbite with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor does he take up a reproach against his friend; in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but he honors those who fear the Lord; he who swears to his own hurt and does not change; he who does not put out his money at usury, nor does he take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things shall never be moved.

Speaking the truth from the heart shows love toward others. Lies of any kind—bald-faced, white, or anywhere in between—cause separation and distrust; while truth, though sometimes hard to bear at first, produces unity and trust in the end. We should be honest with one another, but it must be tempered with kindness and gentleness.

Positive Expressions of Fellowship

Notice the positive expressions of fellowship, seen in Acts 2. It is plain and clear that this becomes a very real test for every one of us.

Acts 2:41-47 Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need [just as we often do at the Feast, looking for people in need]. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

Do we conform to this picture? Is this true of us? Is this the kind of thing we are doing?

These things are absolutes. There is no getting away from them. We are either Christians or we are not, and we know which we are, in the light of this truth. This is put to us here in several phrases:

Verse 42 And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

Verse 44 Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common.

Verse 45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

Verse 46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart.

This is one of the reasons it is so important to stay together at the feast site as much as it is in us. This is where most of the fellowship is happening.

Now I want to emphasize particularly verses 42 and 46. These men and women had become Christians. How did they show it? Negatively, they separated themselves from what they had been. Positively, they became members of the church and continued in the church.

Let us dissect this. The first thing we are told is that they came together constantly, “They continued steadfastly,” and they, “continuing daily with one accord in the temple.” All who believed these things, all who were Christians, were constantly found together.

One of the first tests you must apply to yourself, or to anybody else, in order to discover whether or not you are a Christian is to ask the question: Do you want to come together with other Christians? If you do not feel this desire, there is only one explanation: You may not be a Christian.

Now one would have thought that it would be unnecessary to say a thing like that, but, sadly, this warning is needed. Some people think that you can be a Christian even when you are strictly the non-church-going type, and that he himself is a better Christian than those who do go to church. They think those who do go to church are just hypocrites who attend out of mere tradition.

Granted there are some who are hypocrites. We know there are tares in the church. But that is not a valid excuse for staying away from worshipping God with brethren.

Essentially, they are saying, “I’m a Christian, but I don’t go to church. I’m not that type. I can just stay home and computer-stream from a smorgasbord of preachers and topics of my choosing.” Human reasoning makes this seem so attractive. But that reasoning is exactly what Satan wants you to think. According to the book of Acts, such a person is *not* really a Christian.

Let me qualify this: I am not talking about the person who is the only one in his area in God's church, or someone who is forced to stay at home because of sickness or injury. There are valid reasons for it. But tiredness is an unjustifiable excuse for avoiding acceptable worship and fellowship.

Galatians 6:9 And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.

To the church at Ephesus, Jesus inspired John to record this revelation:

Revelation 2:2-3 "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary."

We must be careful to not put little or no value in fellowship; and we must make the effort to appear before God wherever He has placed His name. We must be continually steadfast by not behaving in a manner that is a denial and contradiction of what those first Christians did and what all other true Christians have always done. An indication of new, divine life is a drawing together of people who have this life in common.

Mercy and Compassion

The fourth solid leg on which unity stands is the Christian knowledge of God's mercy and compassion. Mercy is a word that is used both of human beings and of God. It is the word that occurs in Romans 12:1, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God."

In Ephesians 2:4-5, God can be described as, "rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ."

This side of God's character is captured in the description, "Father of mercies."

II Corinthians 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.”

The primary facets of God's mercy are forgiveness, deliverance, and restoration. In light of these verses, it is clear that Paul is appealing to our experience of mercy from God. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, then you have experienced God’s compassion.

Titus 3:4-6 But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior.

James closely reflects the spirit of mercy in the first two chapters of his epistle. It relates to caring for the fatherless, helping the widow, respecting the poor, feeding the hungry, and clothing the naked. Under God, "Mercy triumphs over judgment."

James 2:12-13 So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

The existence of mercy and compassion should keep us from disunity. God’s children were never meant to be snarling wolves, but to live in peaceful fellowship together. Disunity breaks the very structure of life. Our Savior Jesus Christ leads us in this life and is leading us into His Kingdom. By this we have known great mercy.

How, then, can we fail to show mercy and compassion to those who are trying to obey God and live His way of life, yet may have offended us? We can essentially think of mercy as compassion in action. The Greek word from which compassion is derived means literally, "from the bowels," indicating the natural gut reaction to someone or something we love. Mercy, therefore, is both feeling compassion and acting upon it. Mercy is, “Love in action!”

Mercy is aid rendered to someone who is miserable or needy, especially someone who is either in debt or without claim to favorable treatment. God's people should be like-minded in showing mercy, which brings joy.

Philippians 2:2 fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.

His appeal is a personal one. There can be no happiness for him as long as he knows that there is disunity in the church which is dear to him. If the brethren would complete his joy, let them complete their fellowship, which means we must be connected with one another. It is not with a threat that Paul speaks to the Christians of Philippi but with the appeal of love.

Psalms 133:1 Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!

To fellowship in unity!

Godly unity produces joy because it overcomes the sorrow of self-seeking and fulfills the true love of outgoing concern for others. Joy through unity comes when God's people have all spiritual things in common—the same beliefs and desires working toward a common goal.

How does the matter of Christian unity stand with you? Are there divisions that should not exist? Are there rationalizations for divisive, non-Christian conduct? Is there someone against whom you hold a grudge or whom you will not forgive? You must reconcile now because you may not be alive tomorrow.

In the way of a paraphrase of Philippians 2:1-2 Paul is saying, "If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if His love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care. then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends."

May we all be unified in the Body of Christ. We have the perfect opportunity here at the Feast of Tabernacles this year to make the best of this wonderful

gift we have been given by God. Use it to the benefit and service of one another!