

The Christian Unity Crisis

The Covenant of Peace Church

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Scripture Reading – Ephesians 4:1-6

4 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, 3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

Dear friends, today I would like to continue in a way the message that I brought three weeks ago. Those who were here then might recall that we looked at the “Christian Identity Crisis”, and examined issues around all the confusion that is running rampant throughout the modern American church – to the point where many Americans that claim to be “christians” not only do **not know** what that means, but wittingly or not, are actively working **against** the gospel message and the Great Commission, from Matthew 28:

18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

So three weeks ago we examined Philippians 3:17-21 to help us individually discern true believers from the tares, goats, or wolves within the church. We ended that message by looking at three Distinctive Qualities of the True Christian -- They are found in Philippians Chapter 3 verse 3. Here Paul gave the church at Philippi, and by extension of the wonderful gift of Scripture, gives **us** these three qualities of a true Christian, those "...who worship in the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus and who put no confidence in the flesh."

Now this morning, I could have just as easily returned to the Book of Philippians – this time in Chapter 2 – to draw out today's message on Christian Unity. In fact, let's take a look at it right now. Turn with me to Philippians Chapter 2:1-11:

[Read Philippians 2:1-11]

Isn't it wonderful how we see clearly in the language of this text the fulfillment of the Great Commission we just saw a few minutes ago in Matthew 28? Paul recognized vividly that making true disciples requires unity in all teachings about Christ – in order to “*observe all that [Christ] commanded*”. Also, we can see that in his Epistles to both the Ephesian and Philippian Churches, Paul was very concerned about true unity in the early church.

Now to begin to expound upon this unity, let's go back to the Ephesians passage and take a closer look at that which we are to be united. Does that sound fair? After all, we hear from all types of people – both inside and outside the church -- that is is very important for us to come together in unity. But the world's call for unity is very deceptive, and we must be careful to understand the unity to which Christians are commanded to aspire. Here's another look at Ephesians 4:3-6, with some emphasis added:

*3 being diligent to preserve the **unity** of the Spirit in **the** bond of peace. 4 There is **one** body and **one** Spirit, just as also you were called in **one** hope of your calling; 5 **one** Lord, **one** faith, **one** baptism, 6 **one** God and Father of **all** who is over **all** and through **all** and in **all**.*

I will submit to you this morning that the exegesis of this passage does not require an extensive study of the Greek. Everything in verses 3 through 6 clearly describes the unity which the church is to be “*diligent to preserve*”. The simple terms “the”, “one”, and “all” in our English translations have the same meaning in the Greek –

- “**the**” is an implied definite article that tells us there is only one such bond of peace (with God);
- “**one**” means certainly and only one and no more; and
- “**all**” describes each and every believer that is a child of God through the Spirit (v. 3).

Now this does not seem to difficult to understand, does it? Simply stated, there is only one hope and saving faith in Christ – defining one bond of peace to God in the Spirit, and we are

all commanded to diligently preserve this unity. So why are we having so much trouble with this in the church today?

Well sadly, it begins with the loss of meaning that we live within our culture. Let me briefly explain the point. Up until about 150 years ago, western civilization held to the following definition of truth (excerpting and paraphrasing from the website "theopedia.com"):

Truth in essence is conformity to fact, reality, or actuality. *Truth* is often that which is considered to be the supreme reality and to have the ultimate meaning and value of existence. Historically, Christians regard the Bible as communicating the truth about God and spiritual things, answering the ultimate questions of life and meaning in this world.

The nature of truth is crucial to the Christian faith. Not only does Christianity claim there is absolute truth (truth for everyone, everywhere, at all times), but it insists that truth about the world (reality) is that which corresponds to the way things really are. For example, the statement "God Exists" means that there really is a God outside the universe, an extracosmic Being. Likewise, the claim that "God raised Christ from the dead" means that the dead corpse of Jesus of Nazareth supernaturally vacated its tomb alive three days after its burial. Christian truth claims really correspond to the state of affairs about which they claim to inform us.

But if you have been on some other planet or lost in the jungle for the past 150 years, you might not know about the significant loss of this meaning about "truth" in our culture. Let's look at just a few examples that have infiltrated the world and sadly ever-increasingly in the church over the past several decades.

What Truth Is Not...

Truth can be understood both from what it is and from what it is not. There are many inadequate views of the nature of truth. Most of these result from a confusion between the nature (definition) of truth and a test (defense) of truth, or from not distinguishing the result from the rule.

...Truth is not "what works."

One popular theory is the philosophical view of William James and his followers that truth is what works, also known as pragmatism. I was subjected to this nonsense in my college days. According to James, "Truth is the expedient in the way of knowing. A statement is known to be

true if it brings the right results. It is the expedient as confirmed by future experience." It's really just a restatement the myth that the "ends justify the means". But who decides the "right results"? Also, simply because something works does not make it true. For instance, this is not how truth is understood in court. Judges tend to regard the expedient as perjury.

...Truth is not just "that which is coherent" or "what is comprehensive."

Some thinkers have suggested that truth is what is internally consistent; it is coherent and self-consistent. But this too is an inadequate definition. Empty statements hang together, even though they are devoid of truth content. "All wives are married women" is internally consistent, but it is empty. It tells us nothing about reality ... Another idea is that the view that explains the most data is true. Not all long-winded presentations are true and concise ones are not all false. It is quite possible on one hand to have a comprehensive view of what is false (e.g., Roman Catholic doctrine or naturalistic evolution) or on the other hand to have a partial or incomplete view of what is true (e.g. eschatology).

...Truth is not "what is existentially relevant.", or more simply, "what is true to me"

Following Søren Kierkegaard and other existential philosophers, some have insisted that truth is what is relevant to our existence or life and false if it is not. Truth is subjectivity, Kierkegaard said; truth is livable. However, there are many kinds of truth, physical, mathematical, historical, and theoretical. But if truth by its very nature is found only subjectively in existential relevance, or "what is true to me" for everybody, then none of these could be true, or would be "true" differently to different people. This is the heart of what is known as relativism.

...Truth is not "what feels good."

The popular subjective view is that truth gives a satisfying feeling, and error feels bad. Truth is found in our subjective feelings. Many mystics and new age enthusiasts hold versions of this faulty view, though it also has a strong and increasing influence among some seeker-friendly, "felt-needs" oriented Christian groups. Have you heard that nationally known preacher that has popularized the phrase "God loves you, and has a wonderful plan for your life"? Of course, even with temporal matters, it is evident that bad news can be true. Look at it this way -- if what feels good is always true, then we would not have to believe anything unpleasant. Bad report cards do not make a student feel good, but the student refuses to believe them at his or her academic peril. Yet they are indeed very true.

... And also today, plain old apathy is creating millions of Americans who just don't care about truth, either what it means in general or how it impacts themselves – right now and forever. Anyone who has evangelized in a public setting has witnessed this.

So why did I take a few minutes to give a brief overview of truth? Because it is at the heart of the unity to which we are called. **Any Christian “unity” without standing under absolute biblical truth is not unity at all.**

When we as Christians are talking about unity, we're talking about the true church, and understanding the church is a very foundational and very basic necessity for those of us who make up the body of Christ. I am convinced that most Christians, most professing Christians, don't really understand the church. There are people in denominations, traditional denominations, that essentially are run or operated the way they've been operated for years and years, and people become familiar with the way they operate. They fit into the the system, and usually participate in the rituals and routines (although often not understanding why). But increasingly these people do not care or investigate even at a simple level whether their church reflects a clear biblical *ecclesiology* – another one of those three-dollar words that simply means the study of the church and its working on the earth. In addition to all the denominations, there all of those little pop-up churches that are all over everywhere all the time that by profession call themselves churches but when you look a little more closely at them, you wonder if those people really understand what a church is at all. And I'm not so much talking about the size of a church, although I'm also not convinced that it is the clearest and most powerful testimony of our unity in the Lord Jesus Christ is accomplished by 100s of denominations and 1000s of independent churches all “doing their own thing”. This creates a “target rich environment” by which the enemies of Christ take many shots at His bride.

When the church gets fragmented into little groups which all have their own pet philosophy, we send a very confused message to the world. A unified church, fully flourishing with manifold gifts of the Holy Spirit and extensive ministry, being able to do what we're able to do what we are extolled to do by Paul in both Ephesians, Philippians, and in the other Epistles. This makes an impact on the world and a declaration of the unity in the body of Christ and its collective power, as all the gifts are operating.

And did you know this is not a new problem in the 21st Century? It was Michael Griffiths who wrote a book over 40 years ago called *God's Forgetful Pilgrims* who said this: “Christians collectively seem to be suffering from a strange amnesia. They go to church but they've forgotten what it's all about” as they live their lives. One writer said, “Church is like a merry-

go-round, lots of music, people going up and down, some movement and good feelings but you always get off exactly where you got on.”

Indeed many churches today struggle with an identity crisis. They moved beyond a time when they were at least struggling with the philosophy and doctrine, and now the struggle seems to be with this sort of entrepreneurial attitude that anyone who chooses to, anybody who wants to can just sort of launch a church out of nowhere and stylize that church to whatever preference he has -- and the result can legitimately be called a “church”. As the professing church struggles to figure itself out, one can only surmise that *if the picture is unclear to the people who profess to be Christ’s, how unclear must the picture be to the outside world?*

I was speaking recently about this very thing with Pastor Blair. It saddens me deeply that one of the warnings of the Roman Catholic church against the Protestant Reformation was that it would lead to a complete breakdown of church order and eventually lead to fragmented leadership and doctrine. Indeed many self-professing churches today have way too much freedom to reinvent itself over and over and over again as it wills. Don't get me wrong – Christ loves His church, and it thrills me to serve within the true church. But we elders must also understand what the church is and have endeavored to convey that to you and to many others—to communicate the true identity of the church, all around the world.

You and I must love the church, first of all, because the church is being built by the Lord Himself. Let's take a quick tour of what this church believes and teaches about this. We could start in Matthew 16:18, “...I will build My church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” And we believe and teach that the immutable, sovereign, faithful, omnipotent Lord of heaven—whose Word can never return void but always accomplishes what He says, whose purposes always come to pass, whose will is always fulfilled ultimately, whose plan is invincible—has spoken, and He has spoken about the ultimate triumph of His church. He knows His sheep. He knows them by name. Their names have been in His book since before the foundation of the world. He chose them. He called them to Himself. He regenerated them. He redeemed them. He transformed them. He’s in the process of sanctifying them, and He will ultimately bring them to glory. The Lord is building His church.

And the goal of all of this is to make His church a visible image of Christ in the world. One way to look at it would be to say that Christ was God incarnate in the world, and the church is Christ incarnate in the world. And so the goal of Christ in His church on earth is to conform us to the image of Christ. That's the prize of the upward call. And Paul says, "I'm pressing toward that. What I will be in eternity is what I long to be here—to be like Christ, to be shaped into His image." Not only to look like Him from a moral standpoint, but to teach like Him from a theological standpoint, to love like Him from the standpoint of virtue, and to minister like Him from the standpoint of behavior in the world. Christ is building His church, and He's building His church to look like Him. Hence, His church has greatly benefited and the world has benefited when the church has the full range of the gifts of the body of Christ functioning together. ...And have you considered this. The Church is the only thing He's building in this world today; creation is complete and being sustained by the power of His Word, but He's still building His church. What a wonderful privilege to be a part of that.

Similarly, we should love the church because the church is our Lord's most precious reality on earth. He was sent to seek and to save the lost. And He says, "What satisfies Me is this incredible ministry that the Father has given to Me." It drove Him all the way to the cross.

In 2 Corinthians 8:9 we read that "though He was rich"—He was infinitely rich as God is rich—"yet for your sakes He became poor that you through His poverty might be made rich." "He became poor" isn't speaking about that He didn't have any money. It doesn't mean that. It doesn't mean that He was limited in His wardrobe. It's talking about poverty in a divine sense. He became poor in the sense that He divested Himself of His eternal riches. Sure, He came from a working family. His father had raised Him as a builder, as a carpenter, they likely had a small family business in Nazareth. When He became an itinerant preacher, He was dependent on gifts of people. But even then, He was not in abject poverty. That's not what that means. What it means is, He divested Himself temporarily of His riches as God in heavenly glory and came to earth. The gospel, the incarnation, the condescension of Christ for the purpose of redeeming the Father's elect was His joy. This is the most precious thing He has on earth.

And as such, His people are to be cared for with consideration of who they belong to. When pastors and elders understand that we're shepherding not our sheep but His sheep, when we're caring for not our children, but His children; not the folks that are who they are because

we love them, but the folks who are who they are because He loves them. That raises the responsibility to a very high level.

When it talks about Him becoming poor, it means He took on the form of man, the form of a slave. Went all the way to the cross, died there for us, completely bereft of all His heavenly riches, including even His relationship with the Father, for it was then that He said, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” How precious is the church? It is the most precious thing on earth because it cost Him His life. So we love the church because He’s building it. We love the church because it’s the most precious thing on earth as evidenced by the highest price being paid for it.

Additionally, we love the church because the church is the only earthly expression of heaven. Heaven doesn’t come down anywhere but in the church. And I don’t know whether you’ve realized it, but we talk about that many times here in this church. When the Lord taught us to pray, He said, “Pray this way, ‘Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.’” That only happens in one place, that’s here. Heaven comes down here. Ask yourself, “What’s going on in heaven?” The worship of God, the exaltation of Christ, and the presence of holiness—the worship of God, the exaltation of Christ, and the dominating presence of holiness. That doesn’t happen anywhere on earth but in the life of the church, and it is in the church that God is glorified, Christ is exalted, and holiness comes to earth. Righteousness comes to earth through us, the church. We are unlike anything in the world, and we dishonor God whenever we forget or neglect that reality.

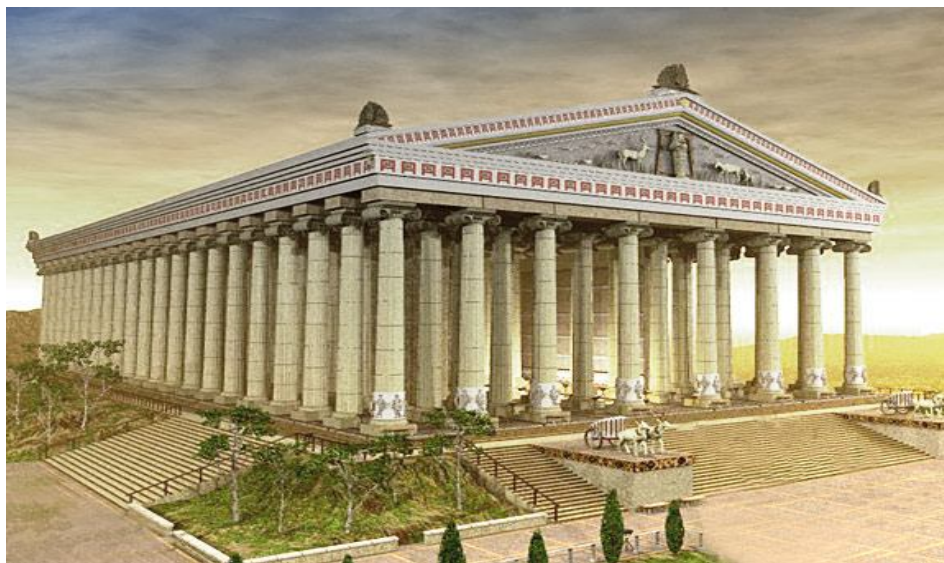
Finally, we should love the church because the church is the source of divine truth. The church is the pillar and ground of the truth. What truth? The absolute truth of God. Saving truth, gospel truth. And what is gospel truth? Everything: the Trinity of God, the eternal one, the Creator, all the way through to the establishment of His righteous standard, His judgment on sin which the Old Testament does—it talks of His holiness and talks of His willingness to save. It also talks of His judgment and wrath on those who refuse to acknowledge Him and put their trust in Him. All the way through to the coming of Christ, the incarnation, the sinless life, the substitutionary death, bodily resurrection, ascension, intercession, and return—all of those things are truths related to the gospel, which when believed and obeyed, bring salvation. And with all of those things, the church has a simple, yet very weighty, commission – Trustworthy Stewardship. 1 Corinthians 4:1-2:

4 Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2 In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.

There is a great illustration of this in Scripture that you might not be fully aware. Please turn with me to 1 Timothy 3:14-15:

14 I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; 15 but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

Now hopefully you are already familiar with this verse, and can see how it also confirms the stewardship of the church over God's truth. However, there may be a part of the story that you are not aware. Timothy was ministering in Ephesus when he was told by Paul in this letter that the church was the pillar and ground of the truth. In that town where he was ministering was the impressive Temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the world; it was known for its pillars.



Historians tell us the Temple of Diana had 127 of them; each one of them was a gift from a different king. All of them were marble. Each pillar given by a king was then a tribute to the king who gave it, so each king of course would attempt to outdo the other kings. They were

amazing statements of the majesty and the glory of a king. And they held up the immense roof. And so it is that the Word of God is a magnificent, bejeweled, glorious pillar that supports the truth. So here was Paul's vivid message to Timothy ministering in this pagan city: As the pillars of the Temple of Diana were testimony to the gross errors of false religion, the church is the testimony to the true religion, divine revelation and the true gospel. And it is the solemn duty and responsibility of every church to lift up the truth, hold it high, let people know that it is unshakeable, immovable, unalterable. It cannot be replaced, and it cannot be lowered from its place of priority. The church then is the one institution in the world that has the stewardship of divine truth. This, of course, is all through Scripture, in Testaments both Old and New.

So when we are looking for unity within the visible church on earth, just what are the marks of such a church? When a church is the right kind of church, what characterizes that kind of church? For sake of time today, let me just give you a list, because it is important to keep all of this things in mind as primary importance when determining appropriate unity in the church – when examining the right kind of church, this is what you will find:

- people who submit to the authority of Scripture,
- people who worship from the heart,
- people who are clear on doctrine,
- people who by virtue of their submission to the Word of God and doctrinal clarity, have discernment,
- and people who live lives pursuing holiness.

Also, they understand that it's not an emotional thing. Paul said, "I beat my body to bring it into subjection." Obedience is an act of the will and the will is informed by the mind and the mind has the revelation—obey and be blessed.

So now hopefully you have a glimpse of what the church should look like. I don't want to ever take for granted that people who come to Christ, come to Covenant of Peace Church, understand what they need to understand about the life of the church. We can't assume that, and we can't even assume it on the basis of the fact that some folks had come from other churches, because we can no longer assume that folks have been in a church that both understands and teaches the basic truth about the church, sad as that may be.

Also sadly, I would be remiss in my duties today if I did not warn about the big scheme of things in the contemporary church movement, where attending church has become a kind of a spectator experience, you go to watch what happens, essentially. This, as you well know, is the most narcissistic, self-absorbed, self-centered society that America has ever known and becoming increasingly more so, if that is possible. People are basically disinterested in anything that doesn't accrue to their own benefit. (Case in point, the 2016 Presidential election.) And professing churches have decided, I suppose, to accommodate that and accordingly churches have become locations where certain forms of religious entertainment are displayed for people who in many cases sit in a dark room and watch the event take place. Churches are staffed very largely by paid professionals financed by the spectators. Very little and sometimes nothing is asked of those people except occasionally to give some money so that they can continue the production. And this, of course, fits right into the culture that we have today.

We have, on the one hand, a sort of couch potato culture, and on the other hand, a fitness culture. In both cases, the idea is to give away your life to satisfy yourself, rather than someone else. Self-indulgence marks the culture in general. They may do only what they want; they want to do in the way they want to do it when and how they choose to do it. If they work hard, it probably is for personal gain. If they stay fit, it is probably for personal satisfaction. They're more concerned about fitness as a way to put themselves on display than they are as a means to taking the gospel, for example, to a very hard place where they would need to have a measure of fitness to survive effectively.

Contemporary churches even offer fitness classes, but they're never in the mission department. They're not designed to equip people to trudge down dirt roads in third-world countries and live a minimalist's life. The age is hopelessly indulgent and dominated by self-fulfillment, a pre-occupation with success. Self-sacrifice ministry, giving your life away, abandoning yourself for others is a very distant memory.

So, in the church when we talk about the church as a fellowship of people giving away their lives for each other and for the gospel, this is a definition that is somewhat alien to the contemporary understanding of the church. Many churches wouldn't even ask people to serve, they wouldn't ask people to get involved, they wouldn't ask people to make sacrifices because it might make them uncomfortable. It might raise the bar of expectation and they

wouldn't want to have to be held to that level of expectation, and that might send them out the back door to a different place where they don't have such a high standard.

Churches have become preoccupied with existing to meet people's felt needs and to satisfy their wants. They are no longer fellowships of those who are sacrificial, those who want to give their lives away. Through the ages the church has basically been carried to the ends of the earth on the backs of those people who were purposely and relentlessly self-sacrificing. They gave up their lives for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of Christ, for the sake of the church. That kind of sacrifice is the benchmark of the history of missions and the history of the church. All the history of the true church is filled with the memory of the noble Christians, and they are noble because of their devotion to Scripture, because of their humility, because of their zeal, because of their selflessness, because of their sacrifice. These are the ones you know and there are many more that are unknown and unnamed who faithfully serve the Lord and will be known to us only when we reach heaven.

Now listen – nothing from God's perspective has changed even though it has changed drastically on earth within the professing church. The church is still called to be a fellowship of people selflessly and humbly giving their lives away sacrificially to one another and to those outside. We undoubtedly live in a time prophesied by Paul, in 2 Timothy 4:3-4:

3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, 4 and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.

So whenever you're considering Christian unity, you must keep this Scriptural admonition in mind.

As Blair has described very often from this pulpit, there are three important components to expositional preaching:

1. What does the passage say?
2. What does the passage mean?
3. How do we apply this message to our lives in the 21st Century?

To finish our time today, I want to make the application of this sermon very practical – and I have some very timely reasons to do so. Many of you will be familiar with several well-known efforts within professing Christianity circles over the past several years – all claiming to be seeking unity. There have been 'evangelical' minister visits to Mormon churches, there have been ecumenical councils and conferences of several types, and there have been published manifestos like the Manhattan Declaration in 2009. If you haven't already hear about it, there are many more being planned right now. Of course we won't have time to get into even a few of these today, but I would like to present you with the following paraphrased excerpts from a recent blog series from the Grace To You website, *gty.org*. The following discussion describes very well the mine field that lies before church leaders when considering how to pursue biblical unity. Not to pick on the Roman Catholic church, because there are many other examples that could be analyzed, but the specific topic to be addressed in the following deals with the 1994 ecumenical statement *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*

Thankfully, while the church is filled with sinners who share the same selfish instincts, God has freed His redeemed people from the bondage of their flesh and given them the ability to work together, sacrificing themselves for the sake of His kingdom and each other.

That unity among believers is a powerful encouragement. It buoys our spirits in the midst of trials, energizes our spiritual growth, shoulders our burdens, promotes accountability to live holy lives, and emboldens us to proclaim the truth of God's Word. Christians are right to celebrate the unity the Lord has forged between us, and must protect it against Satan's assaults.

But we need to keep that unity in proper perspective, along with its implications. We love the imagery of standing together with other Christians, but are we giving too little thought about what we're standing *against*?

What does it mean for believers to stand *together for the gospel*?

In simple terms, it means that while they might have other theological differences, they are united in affirming the gospel's core tenants. Specifically, they agree that sinners are justified not by their own efforts, but by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

It's that last element in particular that offends and annoys our pluralistic, inclusive society. But as F. F. Bruce explains, the gospel's exclusivity flows directly out of Christ's nature in His incarnation.

He is, in fact, the only way by which men and women may come to the Father, there is no other way. If this seems offensively exclusive, let it be borne in mind that the one who makes this claim is the incarnate Word, the revealer of the Father. If God has no avenue of communication with mankind apart from his Word . . . mankind has no avenue of approach to God apart from that same Word, who became flesh and dwelt among us in order to supply such an avenue of approach.

Standing together for the gospel, then, is standing in agreement with Christ's own assertions to His uniqueness: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6). It's echoing the words Peter boldly proclaimed to the Sanhedrin, that "there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

In spite of the innate exclusivity of the gospel, the world's religions attempt to position themselves as co-laborers with Christianity. They might highlight similar stances on social issues, or simply try to identify a common enemy—whatever it takes to present the illusion of unity.

Worse still, many Christians are all too happy to lend those false religions spiritual credibility by operating as co-belligerents.

Such ecumenical partnerships require a muddying of doctrinal waters. Theological distinctives are downplayed or set aside in the name of unity, as both sides come to a cease-fire over controversies in pursuit of a common goal.

The 1994 ecumenical treatise *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium* (ECT) is a prime example. In an effort to kick-start "a springtime of world missions," influential leaders from both faiths attempted to identify and affirm theological common ground for the sake of furthering the reach of the gospel (you can read the full document online).

In reality, they ignored centuries of church history and asserted vague platitudes about unity in Christ.

All who accept Christ as Lord and Savior are brothers and sisters in Christ. Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ. We have not chosen one another, just as we have not chosen Christ. He has chosen us, and he has chosen us to be his together (John 15). However imperfect our communion with one another, however deep our disagreements with one another, we recognize that there is but one church of Christ. There is one church because there is one Christ and the church is his body. However difficult the way, we recognize that we are called by God to a fuller realization of our unity in the body of Christ.

But what gospel were they uniting behind? Let's not forget or ignore—as the signatories of ECT must have—that Catholic dogma pronounces *anathema* on anyone who preaches justification by faith alone. Here is the stark condemnation, spelled out by the Council of Trent:

If any one saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified; in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification, and that it is not in any way necessary, that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will; let him be anathema. (Canon IX)

If any one saith, that the justice received is not preserved and also increased before God through good works; but that the said works are merely the fruits and signs of Justification obtained, but not a cause of the increase thereof; let him be anathema. (Canon XXIV)

Please remember that each Pope, including the current one, must confirm the entirety of Trent on a regular basis, so the anathemas like those above remain fully and officially declared by the RCC today. How can evangelicals set aside such a clear repudiation of justification by faith in the name of unity? How can the two sides claim unity in Christ when their views of Christ's work are so thoroughly divergent? Moreover, what good is that unity once the doctrinal differences have been swept under the rug?

But that wasn't even the worst aspect of ECT. In addition to propping up the frail façade of unity, the document also prohibited attempts to "win 'converts' from one another's folds,"

downplaying such efforts as “sheep stealing” that would “undermine the Christian mission.” It further argued that,

in view of the large number of non-Christians in the world and the enormous challenge of our common evangelistic task, it is neither theologically legitimate nor a prudent use of resources for one Christian community to proselytize among active adherents of another Christian community.

In one fell swoop, ECT declared the entire Catholic Church—which today claims more than a 1.25 billion followers worldwide—off limits from the gospel, consigning them to Rome’s demonic heresies. Why would believers champion such feeble unity to the exclusion of so vast a mission field?

Ecumenism is not true unity. It’s a lie agreed upon—a this one that places a barrier to lost souls to the life-transforming truth of the gospel.

And as the world becomes increasingly pluralistic, believers need to be committed to protecting the purity of the gospel, resisting the world’s urging to mix it with error. We need to keep clear in our minds the black and white distinction between truth and error, and not succumb to the influence of an increasingly gray world. Here’s how John MacArthur describes the mindset believers need to foster:

Christians preach an exclusive Christ in an inclusive age. Because of that, we are often accused of being narrow-minded, even intolerant. Many paths, it is said, lead to the top of the mountain of religious enlightenment. How dare we insist that ours is the only one? In reality, however, there are only two religious paths: the broad way of works salvation leading to destruction, and the narrow way of faith in the only Savior leading to eternal life (Matthew 7:13-14). Religious people are on either one or the other.

Put simply, standing together for the gospel means standing together *against* ecumenical movements that assault and betray the exclusivity of Christ.

So, as we are on that journey to seek the unity within the church to which we are called, we see that it resembles salvation in this – the way is narrow that leads to truth, and broad is the way that leads to destruction. And there are so many other things to watch for, like professing churches that add to or take away from Scripture, extra-biblical methods within the church, and so many others. But our time is up for today – maybe next time? :-). Let's pray.