

Waking the Sleeping Giant - 13

United we Stand

Acts 2:44 *"All the believers were together and had everything in common."*

I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. I immediately ran over and said,

"Stop! Don't do it!"

"Why shouldn't I?" he said.

"Well, there's so much to live for!" I said.

"Like what?"

"Well, are you religious or atheist?"

"Religious."

"Me too! Are you Christian or Jewish?"

"Christian."

"Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?"

"Protestant."

"Me too! Are you Presbyterian or Baptist?"

"Baptist."

"Wow! Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?"

"Reformed Baptist Church of God."

"Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?"

"Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!"

To which I said, *"Die, heretic scum!"* as I pushed him off.

When it comes to unity, it would be fair to say that the Church has drifted a long way from the second chapter of Acts where all the believers were together and had everything in common. What essentially began as one Church, united in their new-found faith in Jesus Christ, soon began to split, fragment and tear itself apart in disputes, schisms and bitter divisions.

Fast forward to the present day and that single united group of dedicated disciples has fragmented into more than 45,000 separate denominations – each one claiming to be followers of Christ and part of the Church He birthed. There is now a lot of division and intolerance in the Church. It seems that some people want others to agree on everything, and when others do not think like they do, they withdraw their fellowship and friendship and establish another group which will align with their position.

I once heard the President of a major Bible college say that a certain denomination was the most united denomination he had ever seen. Of course, his tongue was firmly planted in his cheek as he went on to say that in this denomination there was a small group united over here, and another small group united over there, and another small group united somewhere else. He was actually highlighting the division, not the unity in this denomination. So many times, Churches split because of a lack of unity. I remember one such Church split where one group which broke away then had the hide to include the word 'united' in their new Church name! Calling ourselves united does not equate to unity.

It has always been fascinating to me why so many cults and other misguided fringe groups have so much success. Some of these groups proclaim a message which is much harder to believe than biblical Christianity. If one has to take a step of faith to believe the Christian message, then one really needs a launching pad and booster rocket to believe many of these cult messages. Yet they continue to grow and find considerable success. Why is that?

Well, certainly one factor is that they believe in hard work. Evangelism is not optional with them. It is central to their purpose for existing. While the same should be true for us, many Christians simply do not take personal evangelism seriously. Another reason, and I believe the main reason why these cults are so successful, is that they are uncompromisingly united. They have a shared vision, a common goal, a singular purpose - and they go after their goal with total, unwavering zeal. I believe that this is why they are so successful. This kind of unity is very attractive to many people – especially those who are weary of the religious confusion and uncertainty they have experienced in many main-line Churches. Unity is so very important. God designed us to be united as a people and we will always be attracted to unity, even if it's not for a good cause.

The early Church was definitely a united Church. They exhibited a level of unity and oneness that will forever be an example and challenge to Churches everywhere. Notice that it says that the believers were *together*. In Acts 2 there is a lot said about being together. At the very beginning of the chapter we read, "*When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.*" Then in verse 46 we read, "*Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.*" There is something about togetherness that is so foundational for unity. Coming together is the first step toward unity. It is so important that the very phrase "*come together*" has become a synonym for unity.

When God sets people free in Christ, He draws them into a community called the local Church. This simply means that He puts us together physically. He wants us to learn to love one another. He wants us to find a way to pull together in the same direction. This is what He did with those early disciples in the upper room. The 120 who were waiting for the power of the Holy Spirit to come upon them were together day and night in the upper room. What do you think they were doing all that time? Well, they were certainly praying a lot of the time. But they were also talking, sharing their lives, their fears, their hopes and their hesitations. They were taking the time to develop relationships and to become one people. They were becoming a team, a community.

This can only happen when we take the time to be together as a Church. It only happens when we choose to be more than an occasional participant in the life of the Church. This is a real problem for the Church in today's society. Our culture is decidedly slanted against Christianity. When I was a boy, our culture not only accommodated but it also supported Christianity. Sundays were considered a day set-aside for God. There were laws in many places that mandated the closing of places of business and most shops on Sundays.

In many places across the USA 'Bible belt' public schools gave no homework on Wednesdays because they knew Churches had Wednesday evening Bible Studies or mid-week services. There was no sport on Sundays across our culture. The Christians would not stand for it. In fact, apart from emergency services, hospitals and some petrol stations, the entire society would effectively shut down on Sundays because of the high level of support for the Christian Church. How things have changed!

In today's world, everything has changed. In fact, Sunday is now the biggest sporting day of the week in our culture and often the most popular shopping day! The result is that the level of involvement by Christians in the life of the Church has markedly decreased. In some Churches you have to give an announcement three weeks in a row for everyone to hear it, because about a third are there one week, a third the next, and a third the next. And we wonder why we have a hard time getting any momentum going. As Christians living in a counter-Christian (or perhaps anti-Christian) culture, we are going to have to make some serious choices concerning what we stand for and what we are committed to. We need to do it and the world needs to see us do it. We have to make time to be together.

When I began my journey with God after my baptism 50 years ago, Sunday was Church day – all day! There was an all-age Sunday School before the morning service. Then we had the morning worship service which was often followed by a fellowship lunch. More often than not there were small groups or choir practice or some other activity in the afternoon. Then at 7pm we would gather again for evening worship. For many Churches this service had a youth focus. Then the highlight of the week for many of us back then was what we called 'after-Church' which was a singalong and supper at someone's home. So, it was common for many people to leave home for Church at 8am in the morning and not return home until after 9pm in the evening. That's a lot of 'together' time and most of our Church buildings were full back then! Fast forward fifty years and many Churches struggle to get people to commit to one hour on Sundays.

These first Church believers in Acts 2 were so united that it says that *they had everything in common*. They saw themselves as one body of believers in Christ. It was not 'every man for himself' but rather, 'one for all and all for one.' They had not joined an organisation, they were joined together in an organism, a living, multi-membered body, of which Jesus is the head. They had genuine, God-ordained and God-empowered unity. This was not uniformity – where everyone believed the same, acted the same and lived the same. This was true spiritual unity which God empowers by His indwelling Spirit.

This kind of unity is something only God can bring but He can only create that miracle when His people make a conscious choice, every day, that they will pull together, despite their differences. I'm sure there were differences in the early Church. After all, you will remember that these were Jews who came to know Jesus Christ and the Jews were notorious for their arguments and disagreements. How was it that this early Church was so united?

Well, I believe the answer lies in the fact that they knew that the Church did not belong to them. Jesus said, "*I will build My Church ...*" (Matthew 16:18). He was and He is the head of the Church. It is His will which is supreme. It is His will to which we defer. If we are to experience true unity, it must be around the will of God as manifested in and through Jesus Christ. It cannot be dependent upon our opinions or preferences. A great Church is a united Church, in Christ through Christ and for Christ.

Disunity can kill a Church fellowship. It happens every day of the week somewhere in the world. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he issues a powerful plea for unity in the local Church. He finds it necessary to exhort the Church in Corinth to be united and he admonishes them for their disunity.

1 Corinthians 1:10-12 *"Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ."*

This plea for unity was directed at the growing dissension in that Church. We read of the quarrels which had emerged because the people were dividing into factions. People were aligning themselves with various personalities. Four camps were emerging. There was the camp of Paul, the camp of Apollos, the camp of Cephas, and the camp of Christ.

Both Paul and then Apollos had ministered in Corinth. Undoubtedly a group of Jews in the Church had been saved under Cephas. Apparently, people were attached to these gifted leaders and had a strong loyalty to them. Perhaps it was the content of their teaching or their style of ministry, but in any case, these three groups identified themselves by their teacher. A fourth group had also arisen which seemed to think that they had a special claim on Christ. Perhaps they did not think they needed any human teacher. Even though they used the name of Christ, they were nonetheless just as guilty of a party spirit as the other groups. This was a real problem in the Corinthian Church.

The source of their problem is also the source of most Church conflicts today. It is really a problem of selfishness. It is a problem of *"what I like,"* of *"my opinion."* Look at what James says about this:

James 4:1 *"What is the source of quarrels and conflict among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?"*

James identifies our own sinful, selfish desires as the source of quarrels and conflicts. And when you think of it, selfishness is really at the root of most sins. Selfishness never brings people together; it only drives them apart. But Christ's desire for us is that we become one. You will remember His prayer:

John 17:20-21 *"I pray ... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."*

In light of the desire of Jesus, Paul issues this plea for unity. Paul pleads with them in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that they come together and agree. He asks them to eliminate divisions, and to be made complete in the same mind and with the same judgment. This is a very powerful plea indeed.

The phrase from the Greek, *"that you all agree"* translates literally as, *"that you all speak the same thing."* This is quite an amazing statement. Is it really possible for us to all speak the same thing? It becomes even more challenging when we read it from the Amplified Bible which attempts to give us the sense of the original language.

"But I urge and entreat you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in perfect harmony, and full agreement in what you say, and that there be no dissensions or factions or divisions among you; but that you be perfectly united in your common understanding and in your opinions and judgments."

Is it possible that we *"all speak the same thing,"* and that we can be *"perfectly united"* in our *"opinions"* and *"judgments?"* Surely it would be un-Australian for us all to have the same opinions. But this is precisely what Paul is pleading for. He calls for no divisions.

The Greek word for divisions is *schismata*, from which we get the word schism. The figurative meaning is "to tear or rip." As it would be applied in this passage, it means to have a difference of opinion, or a division of judgment. This was the kind of thing that Paul was arguing against. As Christians, our opinions ought to be subservient to Christ's opinion, and so we ought to be seeking to find out what is God's opinion and conform our opinions to His. If we are all indwelt by the one Spirit, then as we submit to God's Spirit within us – unity is the guaranteed result. The Spirit of God cannot be divided.

Without this kind of unity, the mission of Christ is impeded. Many young Christians have been confused and held back in their walk with God by supposedly mature believers who are propagating conflicting views about the Gospel, the Bible, and the central truths of our faith. This does not mean that we should uncritically accept one narrow body of doctrine. It does mean, however, that we must give a clear and certain message when we speak concerning the truth of God. We must, for the sake of the Gospel, seek to speak the same thing. When we are together, we find that we are powerful.

In one of my favourite Peanuts cartoons, Lucy demands that Linus change TV channels and then she threatens him with her fist if he doesn't.

"What makes you think you can walk right in here and take over?" asks Linus.

"These five fingers," says Lucy. "Individually they're nothing but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold."

"Which channel do you want?" asks Linus.

Turning away, he looks at his fingers and says, "Why can't you guys get organised like that?"

The kind of commonality we are talking about only comes as we embrace who we are in Christ and in His Church. We must see that we are not only one with Christ, but we are also one with each other.

1 Corinthians 12:12-13 *"For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit, we were all baptised into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit."*

Romans 12:5 *"We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another."*

Let me say it again, the principle for unity in the local Church is that we are one with Christ and one with each other. We must really grasp this truth. Remember that Jesus said that if we were one the world would believe that the Father sent His Son (John 17:21). Unity among Christians testifies to the world that Jesus came because of the Father's love for them. Unity is essential in preaching the gospel. Unity is essential in carrying out this top priority of the Church. Here again we find a reason to come together, a cause to rally behind. When we begin to actively share the love of Jesus by sharing the good news of the gospel with others, we will find we are more united than ever before. This is our common task. When we give ourselves to it, we will see the hand of God empowering us and uniting us in Christ, through Christ and for Christ.

Acts 4:31-32 *"And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak the word of God with boldness. And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul."*

Is that what you would like to see in your Church and across your city? That is exactly what we will all see if we allow God to wake up the sleeping giant. When the Church today makes the same commitment to unity the early Church made, we will see the same result. It really is that simple!