

# Church Unity

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[Interview with Karen Veazey about the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual *Unity of Friends* Women's Conference, January 20-21, 2012]

[music – Plenty of Room in the Family]

Does one really need to join a church to be a Christian? No; but if you don't belong to a church, you won't get the full benefits of the Christian experience. God has called His children to live as families, not orphans. The Holy Spirit certainly can use a single individual to do miraculous things; but more often than not, the Holy Spirit acts through a unified group. Acts, chapter 2, verses 42 through 47 tell us this about the early Christians:

**They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 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, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.**

Volume 4 of Ellen White's "Conflict of the Ages" series presents the amazing story of the early Christian church from the death of Christ through the rest of New Testament times. Here is an excerpt from chapter 1, titled "God's Purpose for His Church."

The church is God's appointed agency for the salvation of men. It was organized for service, and its mission is to carry the gospel to the world. From the beginning it has been God's plan that through His church shall be reflected to the world His fullness and His sufficiency. The members of the church, those whom He has called out of darkness into His marvelous light, are to show forth His glory. The church is the repository of the riches of the grace of Christ; and through the church will eventually be [shown] the final and full display of the love of God. Ephesians 3:10.

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The church is God's fortress, His city of refuge, which He holds in a revolted world. Any betrayal of the church is treachery to Him who has bought mankind with the blood of His only-begotten Son. From the beginning, faithful souls have constituted the church on earth. In every age the Lord has had His watchmen, who have borne a faithful testimony to the generation in which they lived. These sentinels gave the message of warning; and when they were called to lay off their armor, others took up the work. God brought these witnesses into covenant relation with Himself, uniting the church on earth with the church in heaven. He has sent forth His angels to minister to His church, and the gates of hell have not been able to prevail against His people.

Through centuries of persecution, conflict, and darkness, God has sustained His church. Not one cloud has fallen upon it that He has not prepared for; not one opposing force has risen to counterwork His work that He has not foreseen. All has taken place as He predicted. He has not

left His church forsaken, but has traced in prophetic declarations what would occur, and that which His Spirit inspired the prophets to foretell has been brought about. All His purposes will be fulfilled. His law is linked with His throne, and no power of evil can destroy it. Truth is inspired and guarded by God; and it will triumph over all opposition.

During ages of spiritual darkness the church of God has been as a city set on a hill. From age to age, through successive generations, the pure doctrines of heaven have been unfolding within its borders. Enfeebled and defective as it may appear, the church is the one object upon which God bestows in a special sense His supreme regard. It is the theater of His grace, in which He delights to reveal His power to transform hearts.

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Wonderful is the work which the Lord designs to accomplish through His church, that His name may be glorified. A picture of this work is given in Ezekiel's vision of the river of healing: "These waters issue out toward the east country, and go down into the desert, and go into the sea: which being brought forth into the sea, the waters shall be healed. And it shall come to pass, that everything that liveth, which moveth, whithersoever the rivers shall come, shall live: . . . and by the river upon the bank thereof, on this side and on that side, shall grow all trees for [food], whose leaf shall not fade, neither shall the fruit thereof be consumed: it shall bring forth new fruit according to his months, because their waters they issued out of the sanctuary: and the fruit thereof shall be for [food], and the leaf thereof for medicine." Ezekiel 47:8-12.

From the beginning God has [worked] through His people to bring blessing to the world. To the ancient Egyptian nation God made Joseph a fountain of life. Through the integrity of Joseph the life of that whole people was preserved. Through Daniel God saved the life of all the wise men of Babylon. And these deliverances are as object lessons; they illustrate the spiritual blessings offered to the world through connection with the God whom Joseph and Daniel worshiped. Everyone in whose heart Christ abides, everyone who will show forth His love to the world, is a worker together with God for the blessing of humanity. As he receives from the Saviour grace to impart to others, from his whole being flows forth the tide of spiritual life. <sup>1</sup>

Hebrews, chapter 10, ends with these words:

**Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.**

**So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For in just a very little while,**

**“He who is coming will come and will not delay.  
But my righteous one will live by faith.  
And if he shrinks back,  
I will not be pleased with him.”**

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen White, Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 1, “God’s Purpose for His Church”, <http://www.whiteestate.org/books/aa/aa1.html>

**But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved. (Hebrews 10:35-39)**

Strength comes from unity. Therefore unity is a good thing. But we should not confuse unity with conformity. We can be united while still maintaining our individual identities.

Searching Yellowpages.com for “churches” produces a list of 30 different Protestant congregations in Ridgecrest. Should those 30 congregations unite to form a single megachurch? Although there certainly is strength in numbers, and benefits from economy of scale, bigger isn’t always better.

The worship styles of those 30 congregations certainly vary considerably. Using different styles of music they can reach people with different musical tastes. Each congregation has its own strengths and can meet the unique needs of specific segments of the population.

In chapter 12 of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, he addresses the issue of unity through diversity using the human body as an example. Although he was specifically talking about how different individuals can be unified in a congregation, I believe the principle holds on a higher organizational level as well. Paul could just as well have made this comparison about all the denominations that make up the Protestant movement.

**The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.**

**Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.**

**The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.**

**Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (1 Corinthians 12:12-27)**

Just as each member plays a different role in his or her congregation, each denomination has played a different role in the Protestant Reformation, emphasizing a different aspect of Christianity. Working together, the various denominations have advanced the cause of Christ. Each denomination has made a valuable contribution.

The Lutheran church is responsible for getting the Protestant Reformation started. Martin Luther’s study of the Bible led him to realize that salvation comes from God, not from the church. He also realized that clear Biblical teachings take precedence over church traditions, no matter how entrenched those traditions

are. He would not recant his stand against the doctrinal errors of the Catholic Church. His courage still inspires us today. Modern Christianity is greatly indebted to these foundational principles established by the Lutheran Church.

John Wesley, and the other founders of the Methodist church, searched the Bible and discovered that God not only forgives sin, as Luther had discovered, but also gives victory over sin. The Methodist church added strength to the message of salvation by grace through faith.

Baptists discovered the doctrine of baptism by immersion. Through baptism the sinner participates in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, publicly professes his faith, and is born again. The Baptists protested against the Catholic practice of sprinkling an infant, and rejected the doctrine that infants are saved through the power of priest. They recognized that baptism is of no value if the person being baptized has no faith in Christ. Furthermore, Baptist influence upon the founding fathers is largely responsible for freedom of religion in America. All modern Protestants owe a debt of gratitude to the Baptists for their contribution to our faith.

Later, the Seventh-day Baptists rediscovered the Fourth Commandment. Realizing that the Catholic Church had transgressed God's law by changing Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday, in order to comply with Emperor Constantine's Sunday Law, they vowed to obey God rather than man. Understanding that God's grace does not nullify God's law, they kept the Seventh day holy.

Founders of the Seventh-day Adventist church recognized that most of Jesus' teachings focused on His second coming, and the importance of being ready for His return. Realizing that the signs Jesus said would precede His return were being fulfilled in their lifetimes. Adventist pioneers restored the sense of urgency that was the foundation of Jesus' preaching.

We could make similar observations about other denominations, but hopefully we have given enough examples to make this point: Each denomination has contributed something to the Protestant Reformation by rediscovering a neglected aspect of Biblical truth.

Building on Paul's example of the Body of Christ, one should not argue whether the hand is more valuable than the foot or the eye. Instead, we should recognize the value that each part brings to the body. Each denomination has illuminated a different aspect of Biblical truth. Each congregation may specialize in a particular message, and, as long as it does not exclude everything else, that advances the cause of Christ.

Christ's return is 24 hours closer now than it was this time yesterday. We now have one less day to choose between the Light of the World and the Power of Darkness than we did yesterday. We must choose Light over Darkness. First John, chapter 1, verses 5 through 7 tell us,

**This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by 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, his Son, purifies us from all sin.**

True unity does not come from ignoring differences. Unity comes from learning from differences. The wheel analogy has been made so often that I don't know who to credit for originating it; but I will use it anyway. The closer each spoke comes to the hub, the closer they all come to each other. The closer each denomination comes to Christ, they closer they will come to each other. The way to come closer to Christ is recognize and incorporate the Biblical truths discovered by other denominations. The more each

denomination is in harmony with the Bible, the more each denomination will be in harmony with each other.

The same thing is true of individual members in a congregation. Through group Bible study, individuals can learn from other members of the group who have been given particular insights by the Holy Spirit. As each individual's faith comes closer to the standard presented in the Bible, those individuals will come closer to each other.

As Paul told the Galatians,

**You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26-29)**

With that in mind, let's close our broadcast as the Ridgecrest United Methodist Church Choir sings, "We Will Walk in the Light."

[music – We Will Walk in the Light]