

Introduction to Evangelical Unity

Over 25 years ago I was a member of a church that went through a church split in New Orleans. It was one of the most devastating things I have experienced in my life. The basic issue the church divided over was the charismatic gifts. The new pastor was not a cessationist¹, though he was not Pentecostal either. This experience was so painful to me, the impression still feels like an open wound. I have forgiven all involved, but ever since that time I have felt I was supposed to be an advocate of unity in the body of Christ.

But what does unity mean? While in seminary, also in New Orleans, I had professors who stated in class that the authors of Scripture were sometimes wrong. In my Greek exegesis class on 1 John I remember the professor arguing that John was wrong in calling his opponents “antichrists” in 1 John 2:18-19. He likened chapter two to a twentieth century church split over a minor issue. He specifically stated that the opponents were Christians and that John was at fault. I also remember my professor in a counseling class rejecting any possibility of actual demons existing. I had asked for prayer for a friend who felt she was being oppressed by demons, and he said she needed counseling not prayer, because demons don’t exist. During my time in seminary and shortly after, the Southern Baptist Convention cleaned house in their seminaries because of cases like I have described. Many people were upset and claimed the conservative leadership of the SBC were sinning against unity in the body of Christ. The leadership believed it was being faithful to Scripture. Who is correct?

These two incidents I have described reveal that the call for unity is more complex than most believe. Are we to maintain unity at the expense of truth? Should we embrace truth over unity? Historically we can see this problem in the early twentieth century. In the nineteenth century liberalism swept through the church, beginning in Germany, taking over seminaries and then whole denominations. Theological liberalism is not monolithic in its doctrinal stances, but overall it began to question miracles in the Bible, the importance of doctrines such as the Trinity and the Virgin birth of Jesus, and it rejected any notion of inerrancy.² As a response Fundamentalism came out with the Fundamentalist Papers, which advocated critical doctrines as essential to any question of unity. The idea of fundamentals of the faith predates the twentieth century, but it became very important in the liberal/fundamentalist debate. After fundamentalism gained ground and produced its own schools, it began to implode with its advocates attacking each other over minor issues. Doctrines concerning eschatology and ethical standards such as teetotalism became shibboleths used to advocate disunity. Fundamentalists went so far as to reject Billy Graham, not because they disagreed with his doctrinal position, but because he was a friend with those they disagreed with. Fundamentalism became so involved in elevating doctrine that they backed off of the Biblical

¹ A cessationist is one who believes the supernatural gifts of tongues and prophecy ceased after the first century.

² Inerrancy is the belief that the Bible is true in all that it states and has no errors as far as what the original authors meant to say to their original audiences.

mandate to minister to the poor. Social issues became taboo to them because liberals advocated them. The liberals rejected doctrine and the Fundamentalists rejected involvement in the social issues of the day. From the Fundamentalist/Liberal debate arose the Evangelical Movement, which advocated the fundamentals of the faith without dividing over minor issues, seeing the importance of both doctrine and social concern.

But what are the fundamentals of the faith? Is doctrine or unity more important? How should local churches work together? What is evangelical unity? What are some potential dangers of evangelical unity? These are the questions we will answer in this book.

Larry Siekawitch
Senior Pastor Harvest Fellowship, Sauk Rapids
Professor University of Northwestern-St. Paul

Biblical Basis for Unity

Unity is found throughout the Bible. It is an essential aspect of the doctrine of the Church. Let's look at some examples of unity from the Old Testament and the New Testament and then see how the Bible describes what unity actually is.

The Biblical basis for unity is based on the unity of God Himself. The doctrine of the Trinity teaches that there is only one God (monotheism), and that God is three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, coequal and coeternal. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are so united that the three separate persons are one God. We can see this unity throughout the Bible, beginning with the word for God in Hebrew, which is *Elohim*. *Elohim* is a plural noun, but when used to refer to God it uses singular verbs. The Hebrew word for God is a plurality in unity. See the appendix "How Can a Monotheistic Jew Worship Jesus as God?" for more information on the Trinity.

We are confronted with the power of unity for evil or good in Genesis 11: The Tower of Babel. After the flood, humanity continued its evil practices in building a tower. Verse 4 states, "And they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky. Let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.'" Here we see pride and disobedience. They were not concerned with God, but rather wanted to reach heaven in their own power, exalting themselves rather than God. They also were in direct defiance of God's command in Genesis 9:7: "But you, be fruitful and multiply; spread out over the earth and multiply on it." God notices their rebellion and makes a shocking statement in verse 6: "The LORD said, 'If they have begun to do this as one people all having the same language, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.'" God scrambles their language and sends them away from each other.³ Here we see the power of unity. It can be used for good or evil. God went to dramatic measures because of the potential for great evil their unity entailed. Unity is powerful! But it is also powerful for good when submitted to God. Imagine the Church united in love and in submission to Jesus as Lord; the potential is beyond our comprehension. Could unity in the body of Christ be the key for world evangelism? I think so.

We dare not use unity for evil. It is very possible that the Tower of Babel will be rebuilt, figuratively speaking. Imagine if the world unites against God and His people. If they realize they are all saying the same thing, both the atheist and the religionist, that through human power (i.e. Human Potential Movement, works righteousness legalism, Mormon deification, New Age belief that we are all gods, etc.) they can solve the world's problems and rid humanity of the pesky Christians, we will be set up for the Armageddon showdown. Recently the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of homosexual marriages. This ruling changed the definition of marriage and it has potentially set up the framework for persecuting the part of Christendom (I don't call it Christianity) that still believes God's word. Christian schools could be forced to close down when federal grants and loans are

³ The Hebrew of 11:7 literally says, "... a man will not hear the language or lip of his friend." They had a bonding friendship or companionship with each other apart from God, which was not good and was going to be used for evil.

taken away because they won't hire homosexual teachers and supposedly teach "hatred." Churches could be shut down because pastors refuse to perform gay weddings and the churches won't allow their facilities to be used for sinful purposes. There is no need to fear this recent Supreme Court decision, but we should be prepared, because unity can and will be used for evil as Satan controls humanity like puppets.

Though unity can and will be used for evil, it can also be used for good and the advancement of the Kingdom of God. In the book of Acts we see a powerful example of unity being used for good on the day of Pentecost. In Acts 2 people from all nations, backgrounds and ethnicity gathered for the Jewish festival of Pentecost. On that day God poured out His Spirit on the initial followers and they began to speak in tongues, languages the people at the festival could understand. They were intrigued and listened to Peter preach the Gospel. 3000 people were saved that day. Notice the result in Acts 2:42-47:

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers.

⁴³ Then fear came over everyone, and many wonders and signs were being performed through the apostles.

⁴⁴ Now all the believers were together and held all things in common.

⁴⁵ They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as anyone had a need.

⁴⁶ Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple complex, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with a joyful and humble attitude,

⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to them those who were being saved.

In this passage we see united discipleship, united worship and united care for each other. Let's observe a few important points concerning true unity from this passage.

First, their final authority was the apostles' teaching, the Bible. The Achilles heel of the world's unity is that it contains over six billion different opinions as to what is right and what is wrong, what is true and what is false. True Christianity has always maintained that the Bible is our final authority. Our ability to reason and our emotions are fallible and therefore cannot be our supreme measuring stick concerning what is right and what is wrong, what is true what is false. God in His goodness has given us His word, preserving it in such a way that we can be confident concerning what God wants us to know about what is right and what is wrong, what is true and what is false. True, Biblical unity must be founded on God's truth as found in the Bible. As Evangelicals we believe the Bible is inerrant, without error and therefore fully trustworthy in all matters in which it speaks on. The enemy began His attack at the Garden of Eden by attacking God's word. He questioned Eve, "Did God really say...?" Then he boldly lied, "You will not certainly die..." Notice the original temptation was an attack on God's word and the certainty of His judgment; sound familiar?

Within evangelicalism there are attempts to reject the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. Fuller Seminary professors came out with the idea of "limited inerrancy;" that is an oxymoron if I ever heard one. Others in our own camp say that inerrancy is not necessary for the church to thrive, because it is too complicated

with nuances anyway. These attacks are not new. Several outstanding evangelical leaders gathered together in the 80's and hammered out a statement on inerrancy that has proved the test of time called the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. See appendix B for the full statement. Of course the doctrine of inerrancy takes into consideration Biblical uses of hyperbole, metaphor, phenomenal observance and varying genre. True interpretation seeks to discover what the original author intended to say, not what we think the passage says in our 21st century biases. The Bible is only inerrant when properly interpreted, but that is not as difficult as some claim. There will always be difficult passages, but the main and plain passages teach what I will argue as the fundamentals of the faith. We can agree to disagree agreeably on many things, but we must unite concerning the essentials of the faith as taught in the Bible, holding to the Bible as our final authority above self, feelings or traditions. We want to be like the early church in Acts 2.

Another point concerning unity that we can learn from in Acts 2:42-47 is that true Christians genuinely cared for each other and loved to fellowship with each other. They "held all things in common" and took care of those in need. Some read into this passage the failed ideology of communism, but that is not what it actually teaches. The sharing was all voluntary as Acts 5:1-5 teaches. But the passage does teach that they shared with each other even when it hurt. Unity in the local church must exemplify this original expression of unity if the church wants to thrive. The people in Acts 2 really liked hanging out together too. The early church didn't see "going to church" as a burden; they couldn't get enough of it! When we are truly united we actually love each other, and a mark of true love is when the people like to be with each other. I always tell the couples I counsel in premarital counseling that there are two prepositions that help define real love – with and for. If you really love someone you want to be **with** them and you want to do **for** them. This is exactly what we see in our passage. Notice I switched from talking about unity in the universal church to unity in the local church; both expressions of unity are essential for true, Biblical unity. Some people church hop and think that is an expression of unity; it is not. Staying in a church, even when you get mad at someone, is an expression of unity. There are times when people are led by God to change churches, but my guess is that for every God led change there are four selfish led church changes. We need to learn how to get along with each other, forgiving each other just as Christ forgave us (Ephesians 4:32 paraphrase).

Finally, in Acts 2 we must notice that the church evangelized together. Peter preached the Gospel and told the people to repent; he was not very politically correct. Acts 2 ends saying, "the Lord added to them those who were being saved." The early church took seriously the Great Commission given by Jesus just before he ascended into heaven:

¹⁹ Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

²⁰ teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

True unity means the church reaches out to the lost with the Gospel. In evangelicalism an essential belief has always been that people are either saved or lost; they are either children of God on their way to heaven, or they are not children of God and on their way to hell to be punished for their sin. Jesus said we must be born again before we can even see the Kingdom of God (John 3:3). It is true that many Christians don't know the exact time when they were saved, but there was a time when they were saved; they just don't know the time. There is a popular belief out there in the Emerging Church that states we are all becoming more Christian and that there is not a moment in time involved; it is only a process. Our sanctification is certainly a process, but our justification takes place the moment we truly repent of our sins and place our faith in Jesus. There is another movement called the New Perspective on Paul that teaches we will have two justifications: the initial justification is by faith, but the final justification is by works; this is just a way to sneak the false gospel of works righteousness in (see appendix C). As I have already stated, we have to have the right God and the right Gospel. We also must proclaim that Gospel to the lost world, giving each person the opportunity to accept or reject its claims. Everyone has a part in this. At the local church level each person, in various degrees and ways, reaches out to the lost. But for true unity to take place, I believe the Evangelical churches need to work together from time to time as well. We will discuss what that might look like later.

But according to the Bible what is true unity? There are groups like the United Counsel of Churches that would say unity must entail love while compromising truth. They say that doctrine is the cause of disunity, so we must abandon doctrine for praxis; it is how we act not what we believe that counts. But is this what the Bible teaches? In the Church at Corinth there was a lot of disunity. Paul had to address this sin head on. He begins in 1 Corinthians 1:10 stating: "Now I urge you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction." There are three things we want to observe in this verse. First notice the importance of unity. The division he sees in this church appalls Paul. He goes on to describe how they were joining factions under the name of their favorite superhero (Paul, Apollos, Cephas, etc.). The church only needs one superhero, and His name is Jesus! Unity is critical. Jesus prayed for unity in John 17 and actually went so far as to say that world evangelization depends on it: "so the world may believe you have sent me." (John 17:21)

Second, we notice from 1 Corinthians 1:10 that Paul is primarily speaking of the local church. The divisions Paul spoke of were not the forming of separate denominations (the way this verse is often interpreted). He couldn't have been speaking of denominations because there were no denominations at the time. The divisions were in the local church at Corinth. Denominations can either be good or bad. I looked up the definition of denomination and it basically said a denomination is when churches work together under common beliefs and practices; that doesn't sound bad to me. When denominations get proud and think they are the only thing that is really happening, or they are the only faithful holders of truth, it can be bad. Denominations are not the problem, people in the local churches are. We need to learn how to get along with each other. We need to stop being overly critical. I knew

of a family that left a church because an elder made fun of the wife's pants, thinking she would agree. He apologized when he realized he had offended her, but they left anyway. I knew of another family that left a church because the woman felt under appreciated in a particular ministry even though she left it for another ministry. I knew of a family that left a church because they canceled a particular ministry in the church. I have heard of churches splitting because one member got a smaller piece of meat than everyone else! Christians need to learn how to forgive, how to stop being so critical of each other, and how to love each other unconditionally.

Finally, an important aspect of true unity is found in 1 Corinthians 1:10. Paul says unity must be combined with truth. We are to be united "with the same understanding and the same conviction." Literally it says united in the same mind (*νοῦ*) and in the same purpose (*γνώμη*). Paul trashes the liberal view that unity must come at the expense of truth. Doctrine is not only important; it is essential for real unity to take place. And without real unity we will never see revival according to Jesus (John 17:21). What Paul seems to be saying is that doctrine can and should divide the church at times. But does this mean we should divide every time we don't agree? Most would say no to this and rightly so. But what is Paul saying? I believe he is telling us that we should seek to agree in our understanding of what God teaches in His word, and we should agree on the basic convictions of the faith and the purpose of the church. There are doctrines we should divide over as we will see later, but we should also seek to grow in our understanding of every doctrine if it is in the Bible. Doctrine is not bad; it is good.

In what are called the Pastoral Letters, Paul teaches the importance of doctrine. A perusal of the verses below will reveal that doctrine is essential for every Christian. 1 Timothy 4:16 says, "Pay close attention to your life and your teaching; persevere in these things, for by doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers." Notice for Paul both how we live and what we believe are of critical importance. The NIV says, "Watch your life and doctrine closely." In three places in 1 Timothy Paul tells Timothy to hold to "good doctrine" and to stop those teaching "different doctrine" (1 Timothy 1:3; 4:6; 6:3). He says we are to "agree with the sound teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and with the teaching that promotes godliness." But in all three of these passages Paul goes on to speak out against unnecessary speculation and "irreverent and silly myths." Paul made an important statement that sum up the tension of too much and too little doctrine. He said in 1 Corinthians 4:6, "Nothing beyond what is written." I believe Paul is saying that we should go by what the Bible teaches and the necessary inferences from that teaching, but should be aware of the danger of overly dissecting the Scriptures embracing speculative doctrines not actually taught in the Bible. We can agree to disagree agreeably on the areas not specifically taught in Scripture, but we should seek to agree on the clear teaching of Scripture. For example there are many doctrines where solid, Bible believing Christians disagree on because they are not crystal clear. In these areas we should seek to learn from each other, but we should not divide. But in the areas that are clear, we must agree. The Bible teaches that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary. Liberals don't agree for various reasons, but it is clearly taught in Scripture. The doctrine of the virgin birth of Jesus is important to the church and worth dividing over. On the other hand, churches speculate on what

exactly led the wise men to Jesus; was it a comet, a star, or the aligning of two planets? We can agree to disagree agreeably over this one. Later we will discuss what doctrines are essential and which ones are important, but not important enough to divide over.

2 Timothy and Titus are similar to 1 Timothy in their admonition to follow carefully correct doctrine. 2 Timothy 1:13 states, "Hold on to the pattern of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." 2 Timothy 2:15 admonishes, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who doesn't need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth." Paul recognized that Scripture can be taught incorrectly and warns Timothy as a pastor to work hard at understanding correct teaching. 2 Timothy 2:24-26 is very apropos to our times:

²⁴ The Lord's slave must not quarrel, but must be gentle to everyone, able to teach, and patient,

²⁵ instructing his opponents with gentleness. Perhaps God will grant them repentance leading them to the knowledge of the truth.

²⁶ Then they may come to their senses and escape the Devil's trap, having been captured by him to do his will.

Some Christians think we should never debate or argue with others about controversial topics. Other Christians think it is acceptable to bash anyone that disagrees with us. Paul says we are supposed to instruct our opponents in order to possibly help them get out of the Devil's trap and repent of their sin and false beliefs. But he says we are to do it with gentleness. Recently I was attacked on Facebook for believing the definition of marriage is one man and one woman for life. It was very difficult to respond because of the derogatory terms they used in reference to me, even calling me vulgar names. I attempted to present my case nicely and asked if they would hold off on the slander, but all I got was more attack. I decided to back off because it was clear that these people were not teachable, at least at that time. I tried to instruct them with gentleness and I pray for them all the time, but I must be committed to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15).

2 Timothy 4:1-4 warns us that a time would come when people would not put up with sound doctrine:

I solemnly charge you before God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge the living and the dead, and because of His appearing and His kingdom:

² Proclaim the message; persist in it whether convenient or not; rebuke, correct, and encourage with great patience and teaching.

³ For the time will come when they will not tolerate sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, will multiply teachers for themselves because they have an itch to hear something new.

⁴ They will turn away from hearing the truth and will turn aside to myths.

Our society today and much of the church today has succumbed to feelings over truth. The Postmodern world rightly rejects the rationalism of modernism, but replaced it with emotionalism. The Church has embraced the consumerism of the American culture, "multiplying teachers for themselves because they have an itch to hear something new." If the ancient Bible is true because it is the Word of God without error, then we should hesitate before running after the latest fad. If it is new

it is probably not true. Jeremiah prophetically warns us in Jeremiah 6:16: “This is what the LORD says, Stand by the roadways and look. Ask about the ancient paths: Which is the way to what is good? Then take it and find rest for yourselves. But they protested, ‘We won’t!’”

Paul was very strong in writing to Titus, a pastor in Crete. He gave the qualifications for the elders stating, “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (ESV). In Titus 2:1 he says, “But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine” (ESV). Why is Paul so concerned about sound doctrine in the Pastoral Letters? The Pastoral Letters were written to pastors on how to be a good pastor. Paul knew that false teachers would come in to try to deceive the sheep because Jesus warned us of this in Matthew 24:23-25. Acts 20:28-31 reveals the seriousness of having pastors that teach God’s word correctly. In this passage Paul knows that he will never see the Ephesian elders again and so he wants to make sure he reiterates what is most important in this last encounter. Here is what he said:

²⁸ Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock that the Holy Spirit has appointed you to as overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood.

²⁹ I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

³⁰ And men will rise up from your own number with deviant doctrines to lure the disciples into following them.

³¹ Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for three years I did not stop warning each one of you with tears.

Paul could have talked about a lot of things, but instead he warns them of the wolves who will come to deceive the sheep. The passage says Paul warned them night and day for three years with tears about this concern. Bad pastors lead the sheep away from God’s truth and God’s truth is that important.

I want to discuss one last passage before we move on, which summarizes what we have seen throughout the New Testament. Ephesians 4:1-16 is one of the most important passages of the Bible concerning unity. Here it is:

Therefore I, the prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received,

² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, accepting one another in love,

³ diligently keeping the unity of the Spirit with the peace that binds us.

⁴ There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one hope at your calling--

⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism,

⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

⁷ Now grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of the Messiah's gift.

⁸ For it says: When He ascended on high, He took prisoners into captivity; He gave gifts to people.

⁹ But what does "He ascended " mean except that He descended to the lower parts of the earth?

¹⁰ The One who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.

¹¹ And He personally gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,

¹² for the training of the saints in the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ,

¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, growing into a mature man with a stature measured by Christ's fullness.

¹⁴ Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit.

¹⁵ But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into Him who is the head-- Christ.

¹⁶ From Him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building up itself in love by the proper working of each individual part.

Here we see the importance of unity and how to live out unity in the body of Christ. The passage begins as a Creed with six major declarations:

1. One Body: Universal church of all true believers
2. One Spirit: We all receive the Spirit – no have and have not's, but there are those who don't appropriate what they have. For the pagan background of the Ephesians this would have been a renunciation of the familiar spirits they resorted to with their magical texts, incantations, etc.
3. One Lord: You have to get this right because Jesus is the only way (John 14:6).
4. One faith: Here Paul is referring to the set of convictions commonly confessed by Christians everywhere: 4:13. There were not competing forms of Christianity in the first century church.
5. One baptism: Acts 2:37-39.
6. One God and Father

It goes on to reveal the importance of good leaders. The purpose of leaders in the church is to equip the saints. There is a real danger that if new believers don't mature the wolves could prey upon them. Notice the leaders equip the saints "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's son." Here we once again see that unity includes truth; they cannot be separated. Unity and truth go together because of the danger of remaining babies in the faith. Babies can be "tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching." The church is seriously hurt when doctrine is downplayed.

Ephesians 4:1-16 teach the importance of both unity and truth, and it teaches us how to live out unity. Paul began the passage by encouraging us to walk worthy of our calling. We walk in unity by walking in humility and gentleness. Some people who call themselves Christians need to learn from Paul here. We cannot bash our opponents over the head with the Bible. Jesus came in gentleness. Isaiah 42:3 says, "He will not break a bruised reed, and He will not put out a smoldering wick; He will faithfully bring justice." We are to be patient with each other and accept each other in love, "diligently keeping the unity of the Spirit with the peace that binds us." In verse 15 he summarizes how we are to live out this unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ as well as with the world: "Speaking the truth in love." The liberals want to take out the speaking the truth part. They say it is not important and is divisive. They are wrong. Over zealous followers want to take out the "in love" part. They beat their opponents verbally. The opponents do this as well, but we are not supposed to respond like the world responds. We should expect the world to latch out at us in hatred; Jesus warned us this would take place (John 15:20). But we must respond with love and truth.

In this section we have seen the need for both unity and truth. We recognize the proper response of the Christian is to speak the truth in love. We also have seen that some doctrines are worth dividing over while others are not. But what are the Fundamentals of the faith for Evangelicals? The next section will discuss this important question.

The Fundamentals of the Faith

The Church has searched for the fundamentals of the faith practically from its inception without everyone agreeing on the list. Is there any hope that we could discover this Holy Grail? I believe there is. But first a little history.

In the first century the Church was united in truth, embracing the teaching of the Apostles and Prophets as their final authority. There was disunity within local churches to various degrees. Paul addressed this disunity in his letters to the churches (i.e. 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 Thessalonians) and John addressed a major schism in 1 John. Heresy was pointed out and even names were mentioned in these letters. John mentions Diotrephes in 3 John 9 and Paul mentions Phygelus and Hermogenes in 2 Timothy 1:15, warning the churches concerning these men. Today it is popular to believe that mentioning names of famous pastors in a derogatory way is wrong because it seems slanderous, but Paul and John would disagree. As pastors we seek to maintain true unity by warning the sheep concerning the wolves and false prophets in our midst.

In the second and third century persecution of the church stepped up as well as several heretical movements. The Church Fathers wrote concerning the heresies, especially that of Gnosticism. In part due to the persecution, strong leaders were needed to rise up and lead the persecuted church. An unnecessary byproduct of these strong leaders was a hierarchy within the church. Whereas pastors, elders, bishops, and overseers were all titles for the same individuals in the first century, bishops took authority over area churches. With this newfound authority their official teachings began to rival the Bible for final authority status over the sheep.

In the Middle Ages the Church embraced more and more traditions that ran contrary to the Bible. A definite hierarchy developed as well. Most embraced the Creeds as having equal authority with the Bible. The Eastern Church continues to hold to the first seven Creeds, while the Western Roman Church continued to add more Creeds, Papal and Conciliar declarations. The Eastern and Western Church could not agree on who was the final authority and split in 1054 partially over the authority of the Pope, of which the Eastern Church never recognized as having more authority than any other Bishop, and partially over the addition to the Nicene Creed the words "and the son" by the Western Church (known as the filioque controversy). Unity was at its all time low with the Bishop of Rome and the Bishop of Constantinople excommunicating each other. It is quite amazing that the Catholic Church thinks the Reformation was a blight on unity when the Church had already been divided for 500 years. During this time there remained faithful followers to God's word both within and without the established Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, including such movements as the Waldensians, Lollards, and Hussites.

By the time of Martin Luther the Church had embraced such heresies as Transubstantiation, Purgatory and the semi-Pelagian belief of works righteousness as well as serious moral failure among the highest-ranking officials of the Church including several Popes. There was a great need for a Reformation and Martin Luther, John Calvin and others brought what became known as the Protestant Reformation. When we discuss heretical and dangerous doctrines we will see why

there was a need for a major split in the Church in order to get it back on track with the Gospel message.

After the Reformation Catholics and Protestants battled (literally), dividing up Europe into Protestant and Catholic. These wars took their toll on both numbers of men as well as people's spirit. Many began to blame doctrine for all the disunity and wars. In England some Anglicans began to make lists of Fundamentals to see how many divergent people could be included while Scholastic Protestants made their own lists seeing how many could be excluded. Before we play the blame game, remember that true Biblical unity must include truth in the equation...but how much truth?

In the 19th century modern liberalism came into vogue, especially in Germany. Many Biblical professors practiced the historical critical method of hermeneutics and consequently denied key doctrines of the faith such as the deity of Christ, salvation by grace alone and the virgin birth of Jesus. Humanism flourished with the belief in the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of Man. The doctrine of depravity was replaced with an optimism toward humanity. Then in 1914 WWI hit, an example of disunity if there ever was one! Liberalism was not phased, calling WWI the war to end all wars.

There were two reactions to modern liberalism in the Church. First Neo-Orthodoxy responded by rejecting Liberalism's optimism toward humanity. Unfortunately they didn't reject liberalism's hermeneutic of criticism toward the Bible. When human study overrules the Bible the final authority becomes the Self by default. The sinful, finite and error-prone humans become the final arbiters of what is right and what is wrong, what is true and what is false. The second reaction was modern Fundamentalism. Pastors, theologians and laymen who still believed the Bible was without error and God's word for humanity worked together to combat liberalism and Neo-orthodoxy. Their intentions were sincere and the movement looked like a wonderful example of unity until they turned on each other over minor issues concerning eschatology and other important, but not essential doctrines of the faith.

In the 1940's a new movement was born – Evangelicalism. Evangelicalism has its roots in 17th century Pietism and Puritanism as well as the Reformation, but it came to its own as a reaction to Fundamentalism without erring on the side of Neo-Orthodoxy and Liberalism. With the liberals, Evangelicals believed that the Church must respond to the social ills of its day. The Church must fully engage society, defending the poor and weak against the powerful. But with Fundamentalists, Evangelicals believed that the Bible was the inerrant word of God. It did not "become" God's word existentially as the Neo-orthodox believed; it was the word of God in propositional form. Evangelicals stood firm on the doctrines of substitutionary atonement, the Trinity, the inerrancy of Scripture, Salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ, the eternal judgment of hell and the necessity of a born again experience for salvation. But Evangelicals didn't believe minor doctrines were important enough to divide over. Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans and others from various denominations believed they could be united as Christians over these core beliefs and practices. But what are the fundamentals of the faith?

To examine the fundamentals of the faith we must first look at what the Scriptures declare. Galatians 1:8-9, 2 Corinthians 11:1-4 and 1 John 4:1-13 are key passages in determining what the Fundamentals are as well as 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and Colossians 3:5-7 for essential moral practice. First let's examine Galatians 1:8-9 where we will see that we must have the correct Gospel before true, Biblical unity can take place. The Book of Galatians is the only book Paul writes where he doesn't commend the church for something in his introduction. Even in his letters to the Corinthians, Paul tells them something good about themselves before he addresses the many sins they were plagued with. But in Galatians the situation was so serious he bypasses the encouragement and warns the church of the serious danger they were in. In verses 1:6-7 he begins:

⁶ I am amazed that you are so quickly turning away from Him who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel--

⁷ not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are troubling you and want to change the good news about the Messiah.

The Galatians were in danger of turning from the true Gospel and trading it in for a false gospel. He specifically declares that there is only one true Gospel. Some were "troubling" the Galatians as wolves in sheep's clothing by attempting to get them to replace the true Gospel for a false, legalistic gospel. Most scholars believe the antagonists of Galatians were the *Judaizers* who attempted to combine the Old Testament law with the New Covenant of Jesus. Paul would have nothing of this. He even went back to Jerusalem to talk with the other Apostles to make sure they were all on the same page. Acts 15 records the Jerusalem Council where Peter, Paul, Barnabas, James and the other Apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church gathered together to specifically discuss the disagreement between the Judaizers and Paul. The chapter presents an accumulative case first with Peter's declaration that just like the Jewish believers, the Gentiles "cleansed their hearts by faith." He concluded: "We believe we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way they are." The next evidence was presented by Paul and Barnabas as they rehearsed all the signs and wonders God performed through them, verifying the Gospel of grace they preached. James concluded by completely agreeing with all that was said and stated that the Gospel of grace was actually prophesied in the Old Testament. He did ask for sensitivity toward the Jewish people, but James completely agreed with Paul on the Gospel.

With this background in mind, let's look at Paul's next statement concerning the Judaizers in Galatians 1:8-9:

⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel other than what we have preached to you, a curse be on him!

⁹ As we have said before, I now say again: If anyone preaches to you a gospel contrary to what you received, a curse be on him!

Paul was not very politically correct. He actually goes on to say that he is not a people pleaser; he will say it like it is because people's eternal destiny is at stake. The phrase "A curse be on him" is the Greek word *anathema*, which means to be

damned to hell. If someone gets the Gospel wrong, even if they are sincere, they will go to hell. Paul cares about people so much he is willing to offend them by telling them the truth. An examination of his life is a case in point. The Book of Acts describes Paul as one who was either leading people to Jesus or getting persecuted; there was no middle ground or boring compliance with false teachers in order to maintain peace for Paul. He even said that if an angel told another gospel, the angel was wrong. If only Joseph Smith and Muhammad had listened to Paul, the cult of Mormonism and the false religion of Islam would not be here today (Joseph claimed the angel Moroni told him “another gospel,” and Muhammad claimed Gabriel told him his gospel).

Paul was convinced that people must divide over the Gospel. Jesus was in agreement when He said that families would be divided over Him (Matthew 10:34-39). So what is the Gospel of Paul? Paul taught, just like the rest of the Apostles, that Jesus died for the forgiveness of our sins and He was raised from the dead on the third day. Most agree with this part (except Muslims who deny the crucifixion). But Paul went on to say that the way to receive the benefits of Jesus’ provision of forgiveness was through faith in Christ. In Ephesians 2:1-10 Paul describes our predicament, God’s remedy and our response. Our predicament is that we are dead in our sins (v.1), controlled by Satan (v.2) and under God’s wrath (v.3). That is a pretty sorry place to be in. God’s remedy was to send His Son to die on the cross for us and raise Him from the dead (vss. 4-7). Our response is faith that results in good works (8-10). This last part is where people so often mess up. Ephesians 2:8-9 states:

⁸ For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift--
⁹ not from works, so that no one can boast.

Paul is crystal clear that we are saved by the grace of God through faith in Christ apart from works. He is not talking about one aspect of salvation like justification or sanctification; he is talking about the whole thing! We are saved by grace alone. Paul knew by the Spirit that some would later come along and try to say that we are also saved by works so he made it clear: “Not from works, so that no one can boast.” He knew that others would claim that grace could include works as a necessary cause of salvation so he said in Romans 11:6: “Now if by grace, then it is not by works; otherwise grace ceases to be grace.” Anyone that says we are saved by grace and works (semi-Pelagianism) is teaching a false gospel because it is an oxymoron according to Paul.

But what about works? Do we get to just live like sinners after we are saved? Of course not. Paul concludes his Gospel presentation in Ephesians 2 with 2:10: “For we are His creation, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time so that we should walk in them.” Good works are the result of true faith. Works do not saved us. God’s grace through faith in Christ saves us. But real faith will produce works, because real faith includes surrender and repentance. Works are the fruit, not the root of salvation. Easy believism or cheap grace is also a false gospel rejected by Paul (and Jesus). According to Paul we have to have the right Gospel for true unity; Evangelicalism has always embraced this belief as did the

reformers of the Reformation.

The next important passage concerning fundamentals is 2 Corinthians 11:1-4:

I wish you would put up with a little foolishness from me. Yes, do put up with me.

² For I am jealous over you with a godly jealousy, because I have promised you in marriage to one husband-- to present a pure virgin to Christ.

³ But I fear that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your minds may be seduced from a complete and pure devotion to Christ.

⁴ For if a person comes and preaches another Jesus, whom we did not preach, or you receive a different spirit, which you had not received, or a different gospel, which you had not accepted, you put up with it splendidly!

Paul claims there is another Jesus who is not the real Jesus at all. In verse 14 he says "Satan disguises himself as an angel of light." Satan can deceive people concerning Jesus. Any Jesus that is not the true Jesus is a false Jesus who cannot save us. Islam teaches that Jesus is not the Son of God. Jehovah Witnesses teach that Jesus is not God. The New Age Movement and parts of Hinduism teach Jesus is an avatar. These are all false Jesus's who cannot actually save anyone according to Paul. Bottom line: you have to have the right Jesus! The Bible is very clear on God's position concerning Himself. The first two commandments declare that we must have the right God and only worship Him. God hates idolatry and false religions. Jonah 2:8 says, "Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them" (NIV). Romans 1 describes how all religions started by people rejecting God's revelation concerning Himself and inventing the false gods as replacements for the one true God. The entire Bible is in agreement with Paul stating you have to have to right God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the one true God. The Bible teaches two basic fundamentals of the faith that we must believe for Biblical unity: You have to have the right Gospel and you have to have the right God. Any disagreement on these fundamentals demand division. Evangelicals are united in our belief concerning God and the Gospel.

1 John 4:1-13 gives four tests for discovering what is true about God: the Christological test, the Biblical test, the ethical test and the Pneumatological test. We have already discussed the Christological test, but John gives us some more input in it. 4:1-3 states:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to determine if they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

² This is how you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit who confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.

³ But every spirit who does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist; you have heard that he is coming, and he is already in the world now.

We have to have the right Jesus. Jesus is God (John 1:1) and He took on a second nature, that of humanity. We must believe in the incarnation, that Jesus came in the flesh, to be true Christians. The first heresy of the Church was not a denial of Jesus' divinity; it was a denial of His humanity. We most believe both. When you mess with the doctrine of the incarnation, you mess with a fundamental of the faith. The

doctrine of the incarnation basically states that Jesus, who is the second person of the Trinity, took on a second nature, that of humanity when He was born of the virgin Mary. If you deny that Jesus is God, you are a heretic and Biblical unity is not possible. If you deny Jesus is a human, you are a heretic and Biblical unity is not possible. If you deny the virgin birth you are a heretic and Biblical unity is not possible.

The second test of our 1 John passage is the Biblical test. 1:5-6 states:

⁵ They are from the world. Therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them.

⁶ We are from God. Anyone who knows God listens to us; anyone who is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of deception.

In this passage there is a contrast between “they” and “we.” To interpret this passage correctly we need to determine who the “they” are and who the “we” are. “They” refers to the unbelievers of the world including the group John has already referred to who left the church because they never were really true Christians (1 John 2:18-19). The people of this world who are not true believers are basically puppets of Satan who is described as the god of this age (2 Corinthians 4:4). 1 John 5:19 says, “We know that we are of God, and the whole world is under the sway of the evil one.” People of the world follow the ways of the world, which go contrary to God’s ways, thus the conflict. Even as Christians we are warned in Romans 12:2: “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.” How do we know if we are being conformed to this age? We will see in just a minute when we discover who the “we” refers to in 1 John 5:6, but a good rule of thumb is this: If the world goes in a particular new direction morally that runs contrary to what the Church has always believed and also seems to go against the clear teaching of Scripture on the issue and then part of the Church follows the world’s leading, it is probably being conformed to this age. The homosexual issue is a great example of this. The Church has always condemned homosexuality as a sin because of passages like Romans 1:26-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. The world decides homosexuality is an acceptable alternate lifestyle, and then part of the Church begins to declare homosexuality as acceptable behavior. This part of the Church (i.e. Episcopal Church, ELCA Lutheran, etc.) has clearly conformed to this age. As I have already stated, “If it is new, it is probably not true.”

But who are the “we” John is referring to? Some suggest it is all believers; others say it is the Church leadership. But John is quite clear; it refers to the Apostles who were eyewitnesses of Jesus. 1 John 1:1-4 reveals that “we” for John in 1 John refers to those who were there with Jesus at the beginning and saw Him and touched Him and received the Gospel of eternal life from Him. This is why Ephesians 2:20 says the Church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone.” Jesus told the Apostles before He died that after the Spirit came the Spirit would remind the Apostles of everything Jesus told them and lead them into all truth (John 14:25-26; 16:13-14). Jesus could not have been referring to all believers of all time because He specifically says the Spirit will

remind them of what He said to them; Jesus must have been referring to the eyewitness Apostles alone. This is what Peter referred to in 2 Peter 3:2: “so that you can remember the words previously spoken by the holy prophets and the command of our Lord and Savior given through your apostles.” Notice the words of Jesus come through the Apostles. The early church’s test for canonicity of the books of Scripture was whether they were written by an Apostle or supervised by an Apostle who was an eyewitness of the words and deeds of Jesus and set apart with final authority over the Church (note: this excludes any modern day apostles with this kind of authority as well as any Pope or other figure claiming to have this kind of authority).

So what is John saying about this second test? True believers listen to the Apostles, which includes their official writings (Scripture), accepting their authority as the final authority for discovering what is true and what is false, what is right and what is wrong. Paul wasn’t being arrogant when he commended the Thessalonians for accepting his words as words from God rather than words from mere men (1 Thessalonians 2:13). He was not being proud when he told the Corinthians that his writings are the commands of the Lord and the Corinthians must acknowledge that fact (1 Corinthians 14:37). The Apostles officially passed down the authoritative explanation of the words and deeds of Jesus in written form (2 John 9; 1 Corinthians 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:27; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21; 3:15-16 all bolster this position).

The Apostles all followed Jesus and His belief concerning Scripture. Jesus addressed certain disciples who supposedly believed His message in John 8:31-32:

³¹ So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in My word, you really are My disciples.

³² You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

A true believer continues in Jesus’ words. Truth really matters! So what did Jesus believe about the Bible? In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus declared in Matthew 5:17-18:

¹⁷ "Don't assume that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.

¹⁸ For I assure you: Until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or one stroke of a letter will pass from the law until all things are accomplished.

Jesus believed the Bible was the inerrant word of God down to the very letters. This is why He could say in John 10:35, “The Scripture cannot be broken.” So to be a true follower of Jesus we continue in His word, including His word about the Word. The inerrancy of Scripture is not a minor doctrine we can just throw out. We stop being followers of Christ when we reject the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. I am not saying a person cannot be a Christian if they don’t believe all of the Bible, but I am saying they are not following Christ and this is dangerous enough to call for repentance and division if the person refuses to repent. Evangelicalism has always embraced the inerrancy of Scripture. It is a true test of whether someone is following the Holy Spirit or an evil spirit according to the 1 John test.

The fourth test of 1 John 4 is the ethical test found in 1 John 4:7-12:

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

⁸ The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

⁹ God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent His One and Only Son into the world so that we might live through Him.

¹⁰ Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

¹¹ Dear friends, if God loved us in this way, we also must love one another.

¹² No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God remains in us and His love is perfected in us.

Christians love people like God loves people. Jesus told us to love our enemies (Luke 6:27-28). He told us that loving each other in unity would be a sign to the unbelievers and even draw them in (John 13:34-35; John 17:20-21). Unity and love for each other can be an evangelism tool! There is a popular song that has a line in it saying, "They will know we are Christians by our love." The line is true, and we are supposed to love everyone, but that is not exactly what Jesus said. He said if we have love for *one another* they will know. True unity entails our loving each other. We are to love each other so much we actually like being together.

An old question in the Church was, "Do I have to go to church to be a Christian?" Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than being in a garage makes you a car. But if you really love Christians you will want to hang out with them. I have met many people who say they are Christians but don't go to church because they were hurt deeply by a church. I can sympathize with them, but their actions are no better than those who hurt them if they abandon the church altogether. Others say, "I don't want to go to church because it is filled with hypocrites." I also say, "Don't let that stop you; we could use one more hypocrite." For those who are looking for the perfect church, they should not join it if they find it because they would ruin it. We are all sinners, and sinners living life together in close proximity will bump into each other from time to time. True unity demands that we work out our difficulties rather than running away in a huff. I am not saying there are not legitimate reasons for leaving a church. I have already argued that there are legitimate reasons. But if reconciliation is not possible because of Biblical reasons for disunity, the Christian still must find fellowship.

We don't go to church to be a Christian; we go to church because we are Christians. We need each other and that is the way God made us. We need a regular time to worship God together, hear His word preached, engage in the ordinances of the Lord's Supper and Baptism, pray and experience fellowship together. Hebrews 10:23-25 is a very important Scripture in reference to going to church:

²³ Let us hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.

²⁴ And let us be concerned about one another in order to promote love and good works,

²⁵ not staying away from our worship meetings, as some habitually do, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

We are to hold on to our confession of faith. We are to be concerned about our brothers and sisters in Christ. How? By regularly attending our worship meetings.

Some translations translate “worship meetings” as “assembling together” (NAU) or “meeting together” (NIV). The Greek word is *episunagogay*. Notice the word *synagogue* in it? It refers to gathering together for worship or religious purposes. If you were to ask a first century Christian if it was possible to be a Christian without going to church, he or she would look at you like you were someone from Mars. We need to regularly attend a Bible teaching, Evangelical Church. Being an active member of a church is a necessary way of expressing our love for each other and true unity in the Body of Christ.

We also need to be loving people. If we want to be salt and light to our community we need to act like salt and light, not garlic and vinegar. Colossians 4:5-6 states:

⁵ Act wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time.

⁶ Your speech should always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should answer each person.

1 Peter 3:15-16 is similar:

¹⁵ but honor the Messiah as Lord in your hearts. Always be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.

¹⁶ However, do this with gentleness and respect, keeping your conscience clear, so that when you are accused, those who denounce your Christian life will be put to shame.

Notice in both of these passages we are supposed to share our faith and seek to get people to become Christians, but we are supposed to do it in an appealing and loving way. We don't compromise the truth, but we do respect people as being created in God's image. We speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15).

As Christians we need to ask ourselves, “Am I a loving person?” “Do I represent Jesus well?” Or do I stink? There are a few bad examples that are always very vocal in their hatred toward unbelievers. These are the ones who make the press. We need to make the press on unbelievers' hearts as a sweet smelling aroma (2 Corinthians 2:14-16). I believe in the Evangelical Church. I believe there are millions of expressions of the sweet aroma of Christ in these churches. The world is wrong and sinful in stereotyping the Church as mostly bad simply because of the few loud examples in the media. Evangelicals are the ones who reach out with no strings attached to the hurting, dying world. The tsunami in Indonesia and the disaster in New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina are two cases in point. I personally asked the people of New Orleans who came to their rescue in their darkest hour. The answer was the Evangelical Christians. The city is predominately Roman Catholic, and when I lived there, the people didn't like the Evangelicals. But the disaster of Katrina brought a new outlook toward Evangelicals by the people because the Christians came in droves and spent the money out of their own pockets to help these people. Love is powerful and is a test of true Christianity. Love doesn't make you a Christian. We are saved by grace. Love is a fruit of real Christianity.

The final 1 John test is the Spirit. 1 John 4:13 says, “This is how we know that we remain in Him and He in us: He has given assurance to us from His Spirit.” This can be a subjective test and must be coupled with the other tests, but if the Spirit

lives in you (John 7:37-39) and you are baptized in His Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13), it makes sense that the Spirit will lead you and you will know His voice because you are His sheep (John 10:27). Paul said, "All those led by God's Spirit are God's sons." Evangelical Christians can disagree on how this leading is acted out in our day, but they all believe in the Spirit and that Spirit will always lead us according to what He has already authoritatively written in the Scriptures.

So far these critical passages of Scripture have given us an idea of some of the fundamentals of the faith, those doctrines that are essential for the Body of Christ to thrive in unity. We have to have the right God and the right Gospel. We must follow the Scriptures as the inerrant word of God as our final authority for determining what is right and what is wrong, what is true and what is false. We also saw some ethical standards that must be accepted in order to maintain true unity; this is where the last two passages of Scripture I mentioned as critical come to play: there is an ethical standard that if rejected, will hurt the Body of Christ so much, disunity must be the response of Evangelical Christianity. Like gangrene demands the severing of the leg, Christians must leave those churches that no longer teach the ethical standards demanded in the Bible. How does this work?

There are several lists of sins condemned in the New Testament. Some have claimed that the Old Testament focused on law and the New Testament on grace, which is a caricature at best. God has always hated sin because it detracts from His glory, and because it hurts us. Sin is bad for us. Unfortunately sin also makes us stupid (Romans 1:21-22; Ephesians 4:17-18 my paraphrase). Churches that teach cheap grace and never talk about sin do everyone a disservice and warrant the Biblical condemnation worthy of disunity. Jude begins his book of the Bible stating he wants to write about "our common salvation," but is forced to warn against the sin of cheap grace. Some were attempting to come into the church, whom Jude says are self-condemned because they "pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality" (NIV).

The first list of sins I want to look at is 1 Corinthians 6:9-11:

⁹ Don't you know that the unrighteous will not inherit God's kingdom? Do not be deceived: No sexually immoral people, idolaters, adulterers, or anyone practicing homosexuality,

¹⁰ no thieves, greedy people, drunkards, verbally abusive people, or swindlers will inherit God's kingdom.

¹¹ And some of you used to be like this. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Paul begins this list by saying those who practice these sins as a lifestyle, never truly repenting, are not Christians; they will not inherit God's kingdom. This is why ethics are important enough to divide over. True Christians must unite against sin, because it is so devastating to all concerned. Paul lists all forms of sexual deviancy including homosexuality. We will discuss homosexuality separately later because of the controversy of our day, but notice the passage says those who practice this sin are not Christians. Paul does not refer to those who are tempted in regard to this sin, and he does not mean that those who struggle and even fail at times in the area of homosexuality are necessarily unbelievers. Paul is talking about those who don't care what the Bible says and live in this lifestyle without repentance. To understand

this aspect of sin we need to talk about three things: 1) The difference of struggling with sin and calling sin good, 2) the definition of repentance, and 3) the different levels of sin.

First, there is a difference between struggling with sin and calling sin good. There is a progression of sin spoken of in James 1:13-15. Sin starts out as temptation. We need to understand that temptation is not sin. Jesus was tempted but never sinned. It's what we do with the temptation that counts. As Martin Luther said, "You can't stop the birds from flying over your head, but you can stop them from building a nest in your hair." The Bible tells us to flee temptation (1 Corinthians 6:18). It also tells us that God will not even allow us to be tempted more than we can bare, but will always provide a way of escape (1 Corinthians 10:13). Our job is to look for the way of escape, not the temptation. Everyone sins, even Christians. 1 John 1:8-10 states:

⁸ If we say, "We have no sin," we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

⁹ If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

¹⁰ If we say, "We don't have any sin," we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.

We all sin, but Christians don't want to sin. They have new hearts that desire after God's ways. There is still a struggle, but it is a struggle because Christians love God.

The tragedy of some is that after a lot of struggle they just give in and give up. The progression of sin moves from temptation, to sin, to giving up trying not to sin. Then it gets worse. Some stop making excuses and begin to see the sin as good. Rather than saying, "I sin, but so does everyone else," which is a copout; they say, "This isn't sin." Then they call the sin good and those who don't agree with them evil. This is the most dangerous place a person can be in. Isaiah 5:20-21 says:

²⁰ Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness, who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.

²¹ Woe to those who are wise in their own opinion and clever in their own sight.

The term "woe" is a reference to judgment coming from God. These people are not listening to the Holy Spirit convicting them of sin (John 16:8-11), and are not Christians. They don't settle for wallowing in their sin; they also make every effort to get others to follow their evil lifestyles. Christians must love the sinners of this world, but we cannot endorse what they are doing.

I heard a girl the other day say, "Why are we even talking about this?" What she meant was that since there are several sins mentioned in 1 Corinthians 6, why do Christians pick on homosexuality and forget the rest? My response was, "Suppose someone said, 'I think greed is good. It is not a sin. I think everyone should practice greed and if you think it is bad, you are bad.'" Christians are not talking about homosexuality because it is the only really bad sin in the list. Christians are talking about it because people are claiming it is not sin, which is harmful to them and society as a whole. Homosexuals have crossed the line of Isaiah 5:20-21. Christians out of love warn people of the dangers of playing with sin.

Second, we need to define repentance. Repentance is absolutely necessary

for salvation to take place as well as for Christians to grow in victory over sin (Mark 1:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 2:37-38; 3:19-20; 5:31; 11:18; 20:21; 2 Timothy 2:25; Matthew 3:8; Psalm 51:17). The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, which literally means a change of mind (meta = change or after; noia = mind). It is a change of mind "I don't want to sin anymore" not a change of action "I stopped sinning." In other words you don't get cleaned up in order to take a bath - you come as you are with a desire to be clean. It is a matter of the heart: I feel bad about my sin; I wish I would not have sinned, and I don't want to sin anymore. If someone doesn't want to change, they are not true believers, because they have not repented. By the way, cheap grace, which is a gospel without true repentance, is a false gospel just as much as a supposed gospel that makes works a requirement for salvation.

Third, there are different levels of sin. It is popular to claim that all sin is the same, based on James 2:10. James is simply stating that all sin deserves judgment; breaking one of the laws is like breaking all of them because that person will be judged unless they are justified. Moses is actually the only person who has broken all Ten Commandments at once ☺. Some sins are worse than others. Jesus spoke of the most important commandment in Mark 12:28-34. If there is a most important or greatest commandment, then logically there are others that are not as important, though all are important. In the Old Testament there was a practice called *lex talliones*, which stated that the penalty must fit the crime. Matthew 23:23; 22:38; John 15:22-24; 19:11 and Mark 12:40 all teach that there are different levels of sin. I am not arguing for the twofold types of sins the Roman Catholics call mortal and venial; there is not Scripture validation for this division. But not all sins are the same. Paul makes the case that sexual sin is in a category of its own, because of its unique devastation to the person committing it. 1 Corinthians 6:18 warns us: "Run from sexual immorality! Every sin a person can commit is outside the body. On the contrary, the person who is sexually immoral sins against his own body."

There are doctrines that are important enough to divide over and there are ethical standards that are worth breaking unity over. To help me in understanding what kinds of doctrine and ethics are to be considered fundamentals of the faith, I distinguish between essential and important doctrines and ethical practices. Essential doctrines must be held in order to maintain Biblical unity. Essential doctrines include heretical doctrines and dangerous doctrines. Doctrines that keep a person from being a Christian cannot be tolerated in true unity. Also doctrines that are dangerous to the Church's health must also be divided over. So what are the fundamentals of the faith?

I want to list several doctrines I believe are fundamentals of the faith, doctrines Evangelicals must embrace to unite together as the family of God. I am not saying that anyone who disagrees with one of the doctrines or practices listed is necessarily not a Christian, but that the Church cannot unite with those who disagree. Those who reject any of these doctrines and practices must be called to repentance before full Biblical fellowship can take place. I am not going to get into the issue of church discipline except to say that this is a list of fundamentals necessary for the spiritual health of the Church and true, Biblical unity. I will present these doctrines and practices as my own personal statement of faith.

The Inerrancy of Scripture

I believe the Bible, containing the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments, is the Word of God. It is verbally inspired (*verbal plenary*) and completely without error (historically, scientifically, morally, and spiritually) in the original manuscripts. The Holy Spirit superintended the writing of the Bible in such a way that the human authors, reflecting their own words and literary style, wrote exactly what God intended down to the very words written. The Bible is therefore our supreme and final authority in all matters that it addresses. Church tradition, personal preference and the latest insights of so-called experts are all subjugated to the Bible's teaching. (Matthew 5:17-18; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21)

Why is inerrancy essential? There are three potential final authorities:⁴ 1) Self – using reason or emotions or a combination of the two, most people decide what is right or wrong, true or false from within. The problem with this final authority is that people are finite and sinful. We are simply not capable of making accurate decisions concerning truth. 2) Tradition – whether it is family, national, religious or ethnic, people lean on the traditions handed down to them for ultimately deciding what is true. The problem with traditions is that there is no one perfect tradition. All traditions have good and bad, truth and error, because tradition is simply a bunch of selfs combining their errors. 3) Revelation – God speaking to us in such a way that it is fully trustworthy. Since God is trustworthy, infinite in knowledge, wisdom and holiness, His word should be our final authority. Some do not believe that the Bible is completely trustworthy, but Evangelicalism has always embraced the supreme authority of the Bible over all other authorities including reason, feelings and traditions. Some within Evangelicalism have tried to claim that inerrancy is not necessary, just so long as we still use the Bible, but this brings us back to Self as the final authority for deciding which parts of the Bible are right and which are wrong. Any view other than a complete trust in God's word, leads us to error with over six billion final authorities competing with each other.

Fuller Seminary attempted to promote what they called "limited inerrancy," without success because the term is an oxymoron. Who decides what the limits are? The term is not necessary when one understands that the Bible was written in several genres and must be interpreted in light of the historical and grammatical context of the writing. The grammatical historical method of interpretation takes into consideration these important factors. The Bible is inerrant in the original manuscripts and only when interpreted properly to find out what the original author meant to say. The original author is actually a dual authorship, with God working through prophets. The prophets wrote in their historical context, and their personalities were kept in tact in the process, but God made sure they wrote exactly what He wanted written making the writing transcultural and completely without error. The Chicago Statement on Inerrancy as well as the Chicago Statement on Interpretation are still excellent resources to help us continue to hold to a high view of Scripture (like the Church throughout its history) without resorting to other lower views such as "limited inerrancy" of Fuller or the dynamic view of Neo-

⁴ See my book *The Uniqueness of the Bible*.

Orthodoxy which says the Bible becomes the word of God in the life of the believer but still has errors.

We will use one of the three final authorities. God has graciously spoken clearly through the Apostles and Prophets. God did not leave us to guess what He is saying to humanity because He is good. There is incredible evidence to back up the full trustworthiness of the Bible⁵. Evangelicals believe in the supreme authority of the Bible.

The Trinity

I believe there is only one infinitely perfect God (monotheism), the transcendent creator and providential sustainer of the universe. This one God exists eternally as three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Trinity). All three persons in the Godhead are coequal in power, nature, and glory. (Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 45:5; Matthew 28:19; John 1:1; 20:28; Acts 5:3-4; 2 Corinthians 13:14)

Why is the doctrine of the Trinity essential? As we saw previously, we have to have the right God to experience the benefits of knowing God. God really cares about what we think about Him. The first two commandments reveal that worshiping a false god is evil. God has clearly revealed Himself as Triune and demands that we only worship Him. Historic Christianity, Reformation Christianity and Evangelical Christianity have always believed in the doctrine of the Trinity. Cults like Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons as well as false religions like Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism worship false gods that humans made up (Romans 1:18ff). False gods cannot save anyone, because they are not real and have no power. Only the one true God can save us and He is the Triune God of the Bible.

The Incarnation of Jesus

I believe that Jesus Christ is both God and man, one person with two natures. He has always been the second person of the Trinity and took on the second nature of humanity in the incarnation. I also believe in His eternal preexistence, virgin birth, miracles, sinless life, death on the cross, bodily resurrection from the dead, ascension into heaven, and present work in heaven as High Priest and Advocate. He will return just as He left to resurrect and judge all humankind. (Luke 1; 23-24; Acts 1:9-11; Philippians 2:5-11; 1 John 4:2)

Why is the doctrine of the incarnation essential? Just like we said we have to have the right God, we also have to have the right Jesus. As we saw previously, there is another Jesus that is a false Jesus. Only the Jesus of the Bible can save us. Historic Christianity, Reformation Christianity and Evangelical Christianity have always

⁵ See my book *The Uniqueness of the Bible*.

believed in the doctrine of the incarnation. Any other view demotes Jesus and is blasphemy.

The Depravity of Humans

I believe God created people in His image (having rational, moral, relational, and spiritual capacities) to love Him, fellowship with Him and give Him glory. Human beings are the crown of God's creation, possessing intrinsic dignity, and therefore are unique among all of God's creation. Adam and Eve chose to rebel against God resulting in separation from God. Because of Adam's sin, death and the sinful nature are passed on to all of humanity. Unregenerate people are spiritually dead and incapable of saving themselves. Their only hope is redemption through faith in Jesus Christ. (Genesis 1:26-27; 3; Psalm 8; John 6:33; Romans 5:12-21; Ephesians 2:1-9)

Why is the doctrine of the depravity of humans essential? All other religions teach some form of works righteousness because they do not believe in the depravity of humans like the Bible teaches. The Human Potential Movement, Communism, cults and false religions elevate humans as either whole or only partially crippled spiritually. The world is in the mess it is in, not because people are only sort of bad sometimes. We are all sinners. We are selfish and don't even realize how bad we are. The world is in the mess it is in because we are all that bad. God is angry about the evil we have committed and is coming back to judge the world. When we don't realize how bad we are, we will never seek the only cure that is effective – Jesus. When we don't realize how bad we are, we don't believe God will judge the world like He says He will. If we don't believe we desperately need a savior because we are so bad we cannot even contribute to our salvation, let alone save ourselves, we will not receive that savior or share that Gospel with others. Evangelism is at stake. Evangelicals care enough about others that we are willing to share the Gospel even if it means we might get persecuted. Movements like the Emergent Church do not take seriously enough the depravity of humans and therefore neglect evangelism (they opt for being missional instead of evangelical) to the eternal detriment of those who don't hear a clear presentation of the Gospel. The Reformation and Evangelicalism have always believed in the Biblical doctrine of the depravity of humans.

The Substitutionary Atonement

I believe God has acted sovereignly to bridge the gap that separates people from Himself. He sent His Son, born of a virgin, attested by miracles and by a sinless life, to bear the full penalty for humanity's sin. Jesus Christ suffered and died in the place of sinners, thus satisfying the Father's just wrath against human sin, and effecting true reconciliation between God and those who believe. In the atoning death of Christ, both God's love and God's justice are fully manifested. The righteousness of Jesus Christ in perfectly fulfilling the law of God has been graciously credited to all

believers. Redemption is solely a work of God's grace, received exclusively through faith in Jesus Christ, and never by works of human merit. Jesus paid the penalty for our sins we deserved to pay and imputes his righteousness to us when we trust in Christ. (Romans 5:6-11; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Isaiah 53)

Why is the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement essential? It is the essence and central idea for understanding why Christ died for us. God is just and demands justice. Sin keeps us from being reconciled to God because of His righteous anger toward sin. God's plan is for us to be in covenant relationship with Him, but sin keeps us from that relationship. We need to be accounted not guilty; otherwise we will experience the wrath of God. If people don't understand that Jesus paid their penalty for them, they will experience unnecessary guilt and not experience the freedom that comes from the acquitted verdict. Also if people don't understand the idea of substitution they will not understand how bad their sin is. It took the death of Jesus on a cross to bring about our forgiveness. Any other view of the atonement cannot explain why it had to be the cross. Other views of the atonement are correct and very helpful (i.e. reconciliation, Jesus as victor, example), but the substitutionary atonement is critical.

Justification by Grace Alone Through Faith Alone

I believe justification is a judicial act of God's grace wherein He acquits a person of all sin and accepts that person as righteous in His sight because of the imputed righteousness of Christ. Justification is strictly a work of God's grace, apprehended through faith alone, and solely on the account of Christ. (Romans 4:1-5; Philippians 3:9; Luke 18:9-14; Galatians 2:15-16)

Why is justification by grace alone essential? It is essential because we need to understand that God is both holy and loving. He is judge of the universe. Many people today do not like to talk about judgment, but the Bible talks about it a lot. The only way we can be justified by works is if we are perfect. Since no one is perfect we cannot come to God by our own merits. A good work cannot pay for a bad work because we already owe God complete obedience. Jesus was our substitute, paying our penalty for us, so we don't have to pay our own penalty. The word *justification* means to declare righteous. God declares us righteous when we place our faith in Jesus. We don't make ourselves righteous; God declares us righteous because we trust in Jesus' substitution atonement. God remains holy because the price was paid by the substitute. He is loving, because He provided this forgiveness. Only justification by grace alone maintains both God's holiness and love.

The Resurrection of Jesus

I believe Jesus Christ rose bodily from the dead, conquering sin, death, and all the powers of Satan. The resurrection is God's historical affirmation and vindication of Jesus Christ's unique identity, mission, and message. Historical evidence of the

resurrection is manifest in Christ's empty tomb, His many resurrection appearances, and in the emergence of the Christian church. Jesus Christ now resides at the right hand of the Father and lives to indwell all who recognize their sinfulness, who repent, and who turn their lives over to His authority. (Matthew 28:1-15; Luke 24; 1 Corinthians 15)

Why is the resurrection essential? Paul told us in 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 that if Jesus didn't rise from the dead our faith is in vain; that sounds pretty important!

A Definite Born Again Experience is Necessary for Salvation

I believe that every true believer is born again. A person does not necessarily have to remember the exact time when he or she was born again, but there was a time when he or she repented and placed his or her faith in Christ and was regenerated by God. People are either in or out of the Kingdom of God; there is no grey area. (John 3:3; Titus 3:5)

Why is a born again experience essential? Jesus said that unless we are born again we cannot see the kingdom of God. God calls us to seek first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33). Without the kingdom there is no salvation. This is why Evangelicals have always emphasized the born again experience. Are you born again?

Jesus is Coming Back and Will Judge All Humanity

I believe the Lord Jesus Christ will return to this earth, personally, bodily, and visibly to establish his glorious reign in a kingdom that will never end. As the sovereign Lord, He will resurrect and judge all humanity. Those who have received His offer of life through the Gospel will experience eternal blessings in God's presence; those who have rejected it, to eternal conscious torment in hell. We look forward to the blessed hope, Christ's Second Coming in glory. (Matthew 24; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; Revelation; Luke 16:19-31; Titus 2:13)

Why is it essential to believe Jesus is coming back? Evangelicals can disagree on exactly how Jesus will come back, but we all believe He is coming back because He said He was. Salvation in its ultimate sense is to be with the Lord. Islam's ultimate promise consists of living by a stream with couches and virgins. The Qur'an says nothing about living with God in a personal relationship forever. But look at the promise in Revelation 21:3-4:

³ Then I heard a loud voice from the throne: Look! God's dwelling is with humanity, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God.

⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will no longer exist; grief, crying, and pain will exist no longer, because the previous things have passed away.

That sounds pretty important! I know I can't wait until Jesus returns.

Dangerous Beliefs We Must Reject to Maintain Unity

I reject the belief that there is a second chance of salvation after death.

I reject the belief in evolution that denies a literal Adam and Eve as the first true humans.

I reject the belief that a person could be saved by another religion outside of true Christianity.

I reject the idea of a secondary justification by works.

I reject the belief that God doesn't know everything from beginning to end including the complete future.

I reject the belief in purgatory.

I reject all forms of idolatry, including the use of statues and pictures for worship.

Ethical Essentials of the Faith

I believe abortion is murder.

I believe marriage is between one man and one woman only. Adultery is sin; premarital sex is sin; homosexuality is sin.

I believe pornography is sinful.

I believe Christians as a whole should help relieve poverty, stop human trafficking, and love all people, treating them with respect as humans created in God's image.

I believe greed, uncontrolled anger, selfishness, pride, lying, jealousy, and lust are sins that all Christians should avoid.

I believe Christians should practice forgiveness.

I believe unity is vital for the health and growth of Christianity.

So what does unity look like? I think with this understanding of unity and truth there are degrees of fellowship/partnership Christians can be involved in while maintaining unity. Full fellowship is reserved for Evangelicals embracing the fundamentals of the faith. This unity is to be worked out in the local church with forgiveness, kindness, and unselfishness, working together to accomplish the mission of the local church. Unity is also to be sought in each community. As Evangelical churches we should work together in evangelism, ministering to the poor, promoting the Pro Life position, praying, and serving in other social issues and fellowship opportunities. We should never actively seek to get members of another Evangelical church to switch churches. Sheep Shuffling is not advancing the Kingdom of God. There are times when people will be led to change church affiliation, but the members of Evangelical churches should not try to convince people to make that switch.

But how should we treat those who may be Christians but reject one of these fundamentals? We should not judge people's heart, only their actions and stated beliefs. We should welcome everyone to our churches, but we shouldn't put people in leadership who reject the fundamentals or allow them to become full members, and we shouldn't allow them to teach in our Evangelical schools. But we can work

with them in various ways. Roman Catholics and Evangelicals have similar beliefs in helping the poor and opposing abortion; there is nothing wrong with working together to stop these atrocities. Every human being should be fully loved and respected regardless of his or her beliefs. But Biblically unity is critical to bring God glory, advance the kingdom of God and experience the full blessing of God. Psalm 133 emphatically states:

How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in harmony!

² It is like fine oil on the head, running down on the beard, running down Aaron's beard onto his robes.

³ It is like the dew of Hermon falling on the mountains of Zion. For there the LORD has appointed the blessing-- life forevermore.

Conclusion

So where do we go from here? This summer I have been on sabbatical from my church. I have enjoyed a lot of golf, some amazing times seeking the Lord, and some good reflection on the topic of unity. I have also personally attended several evangelical churches in the area and met with the pastors over coffee or lunch to talk about this important topic. I was impressed by the spiritual leadership in my city. I was also impressed by the insights the different pastors shared and their willingness to unite. We are formulating a plan for unity in our area.

First we will begin to meet together on a quarterly basis as pastors and wives for the sole purpose of fellowship. We believe that if we are actually friends with each other we will not see each other as competition. We also believe that if persecution picks up in our country, which the latest events in our nation seem to indicate, we need to be there for each other. One of our churches will eventually get hit. We need to be there for each other when it happens.

Second we want to work together. We will develop evangelistic events and ways to minister to our community that we can do together from time to time. When we pool our resources we will be far more effective in reaching out to the lost and dying world we live in. Many of us already support the Pregnancy Resource Center and Youth for Christ. I am sure there are many other ways we can team together to show our community the love of Jesus in a practical way.

Third we can pray for each other. Our church already chooses one church each week and prays for it on Sunday morning in the pulpit during our worship service. Prayer is powerful. When we pray for each other the entire Church gets stronger. This is where we are going to start and I am sure other ideas will come to us as we begin to actually practice true, Biblical unity. I hope and pray you will begin to practice unity in your area as well. Together we might even see Jesus come back!