

CHRISTIAN UNITY



CORE
CLASS

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Session 1: The Theological Basis for Unity

N1

As the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have enjoyed eternal community with one another, God invites all believers to make every effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. **Psalm 133:1; John 13:34-35; 17:11, 20-23; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13; Galatians 3:26-29; Ephesians 4:1-6**

Our desire for peace, unity and love is not based on some 1970's hippie song. It is deeply rooted in Scripture and comes from a solid theological foundation.

1. God is unified in Himself

Perfect Community

John 14:11 "Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me"

John 14:10b "The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works."

John 10:30 "I and the Father are one."

Enjoyable Community

Matthew 3:17 "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased."

The Father loves the Son / is well pleased with the Son

John 14:31 "but so that the world may know that I love the Father I do exactly as the Father commanded Me. Get up, let us go from here."

The Son loves the Father

Overflowing Community

Our Triune God created out of abundance, not out of loneliness. Their love for one another overflows into creation.

John 16:15 "All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He [The Spirit] takes of Mine and will disclose it to you."

The Spirit gives to us what He receives from the Son who receives from the Father.

2. God has united Himself to us through Jesus

Justified, therefore Reconciled and at Peace (**Romans 5:1**)

In Christ - righteous and holy (**Ephesians 1:3-4, 2 Corinthians 5:21**)

Adopted - **John 1:12, Ephesians 1:5**

We are sealed with His Holy Spirit - **Ephesians 1:13**

1 Corinthians 1:9 "God is faithful, through whom you were called *into fellowship with His Son*, Jesus Christ our Lord.

3. God calls us to be united with one another!

This should be no surprise. The Trinity is united and we are united to Him through Jesus, He therefore expects us to extend that same peace, unity, and love to our brothers and sisters.

Unified in Christ, reflecting the unity of the Trinity

John 17:11b "Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are."

We share in their unity.

We are to reflect and demonstrate their unity.

Unified by the Spirit

Ephesians 4:1-6

We do not create unity, we "preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace".

We are unified around the foundations of the Faith (One body, Spirit, Lord, faith, baptism, and God and Father of all).

Unified for the Sake of the Body.

1 Corinthians 1:10 "Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be **no divisions** among you, but that you be **made complete** in the same mind and in the same judgment."

Mind-boggling sin going unchecked.

Divisions over communion, spiritual gifts and liberty of conscience

(preferences and opinions).

Paul clarifies highest priorities to preserve unity.

1 Corinthians 15:3-4 “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

He re-centers them around the Gospel! There can be differences of opinion in the other areas, but here there must be unity.

Ephesians 4:15-16 “but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the **proper working of each individual part, causes** the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”

Only if each person is contributing in the way God has designed them to serve, will we all fully grow and mature in Christ.

We are designed to be dependent upon one another.

Growth and maturity only happen through peace, unity and mutual contribution.

For the Sake of the World

John 17:22-23 “The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, **so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them**, even as you have loved me.”

Our unity communicates that God the Father has sent Jesus.

Our unity communicates that God loves us and others.

Without unity, we undermine our witness to the watching world!

Application

John 15:12-13 “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.”

If we are called to lay down our lives for one another, certainly we must lay down our preferences and opinions in order to love one another.

Session 2: Theological Triage

N2

Jesus taught that some doctrines carry more weight than others, clearly indicating that there is a hierarchy of doctrinal significance. As outlined in this *Membership Statement of Faith*, doctrines plainly identified by Scripture as fundamental or essential include those required for saving faith, those closely connected to the gospel, and those we are forbidden to deny under the threat of condemnation. [Matthew 23:23-26; John 17:3; Romans 4:4-5; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; 16:22; 1 John 1:6, 8, 10; 4:1-3](#)

We continue our discussion of the importance of unity by understanding the importance and role of theological triage in the church.

Finding the Right Hills to Die On by Gavin Ortlund—a suggested resource by *The Gospel Coalition*. (Levels of doctrines are taken from this book.)

What Christianity is All About by Alan Scholes (discusses the difference between biblical convictions, persuasions, and opinions).

The importance of Triage...

There are things of "First Importance" –

[1 Corinthians 15:3-4](#) "For I delivered to you as **of first importance** what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."

2 Major Errors

Doctrinal Sectarianism - Every doctrine is considered equally important and we fight about everything

- People spiritually bleed out while we are arguing about free-will / election.
- Neighbors die and go to hell while we debate when Jesus will return.

Doctrinal Minimalism - No doctrine is worth fighting for.

- The Gospel becomes unclear and hard to communicate.
- The church becomes like the world instead of a light to the world.

There are several ways to discuss how we prioritize doctrines. It has been discussed for centuries. Turretin, Calvin, Bavinck, and Spurgeon all speak about the importance of unity in the essentials and freedom in nonessentials.

Alan Scholes discusses the difference between convictions (Gospel centric doctrines), persuasions (non-Gospel centric and often debated), and opinions (thoughts on unclear passages and ethical issues of freedom and conscience).

Gavin Ortlund uses **4 levels** which are very helpful:

Level 1 - Essential to the Gospel. These separate believers from unbelievers.

The Trinity, Person of Jesus, Work of the Cross, Resurrection...

Level 2 - Urgent for the health and practice of the church. These often separate denominations.

Mode of Baptism, Method of Communion, Use of Spiritual Gifts, Women in Ministry...

Level 3 - Important to Christian theology, but not enough to justify separation or division among Christians.

Nature and timing of the Millennium, Days of Creation, Understanding of Election...

Level 4 - Unimportant to our gospel witness and ministry collaboration.

Style of Music, Matters of Conscience and Christian liberty...

Understanding these levels help us to "**contend for the Faith**" ([Jude 3](#)) in a way that does not divide the body. We recognize the hills we must die on and we understand that there are doctrines that will not be fully understood until heaven.

Sometimes though, we focus our time and energy on "*contending for our persuasions and opinions.*" There are several passages that speak to this tendency.

Romans 14 - There are areas where we will have differences of opinion and preference. Romans 14 outlines how we handle some of these lower level persuasions.

In these areas of disagreement:

- We preserve unity by giving each other freedom and by not judging those who hold to differing opinions (**14:1**).
- The mature will experience and enjoy more freedom, recognizing nothing is unclean in itself (**14:2, 14**).
- If one views particular foods or days as unclean, others should respect their point of view - who are we to judge another's servant (**14:3-4**).
- We do not cause others to stumble while we also give them time and space to mature (**14:13**).
- We pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another (**14:19**).

The Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy 1:3-4, 4:7, 6:4-5, 6:20-21, 2 Timothy 2:14, 2:16, 2:23, 4:3-4, Titus 1:13-14, 3:9) talks about the danger of centering our faith, speech, and time on nonessentials. They emphasize the importance of not arguing and disputing over genealogies, speculations, myths, quarrels about words, controversies, and quarrels about the Law. Those who do so will often accumulate for themselves teachers that suit their own passions.

Rather we are to shut this kind of talk down. Remind one another not to quarrel. Charge each other before God to stop. Avoid this kind of talk and ungodliness. Have nothing to do with this foolishness.

"The goal of our theology is "a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (**1 Timothy 1:5**)" (Ortlund, 40).

It is good to be reminded of the theological basis for our unity:

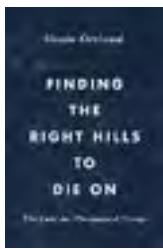
- God is unified in Himself
- We have been unified to God in Christ
- We have been unified to one another in the Spirit

We are called to **preserve this unity** - this proclaims the love of God to a watching world. Infighting and division over doctrines that are not Gospel essentials will make the world question the love of God.

- Our witness is at stake.
- God's character and love is questioned.

Let's recommit ourselves to unity above our preferences and opinions.

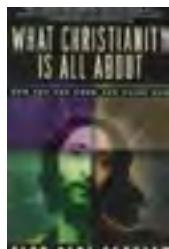
For further study I encourage you to check out one of these 2 books:



**Finding the Right Hills
to Die On**

by Gavin Ortlund

(Levels of doctrines are
taken from this book)



**What Christianity is All
About**

by Alan Scholes

(Discusses the difference
between biblical convictions,

Session 3: Level 1 Gospel-Essential Doctrines

N3

When an issue is a matter of personal preference or has various legitimate interpretations, we show grace and seek the good of others without requiring everyone to agree. We aspire to live, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity." **Romans 14:16; 1 Corinthians 10:24; Colossians 3:12-15; 1 Timothy 1:3-7; 4:1-11; 6:2b-5, 20-21; 2 Timothy 2:14-17, 23-26**

The Gospel in 10 Words

The Bible is God's written word. And from the Bible we learn...

- God Creates**
- God exists. He is Father, Son and Spirit.
 - God is the creator of all things including mankind in His own image.

- Sin Breaks**
- Sin is disobedience to God's holy command.
 - We have all sinned and stand guilty before God.
 - Sin has broken our relationship with God, one another, and creation itself resulting in even more sin and suffering.

- Jesus Saves**
- Jesus, the Son of God, was born of a virgin and was fully God and man.
 - He lived a perfect life and died on a cross taking on the wrath and punishment of God for our sin.
 - Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to the Father.
 - Jesus offers forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life to all who repent and are found in Him.

- Jesus Transforms**
- Christians are sealed with the Holy Spirit and are sanctified and transformed over time by the ongoing work of God.

- God Restores**
- Jesus will physically and gloriously return.
 - All things will be made new.
 - Christians will live with God and one another forever.

As a Christian this is the message that has saved us. Everyday our forgiveness, purpose, worth and value before God is found in the Gospel.

- But we continue to struggle with sin and suffering ([1 John 1:8](#)).
- The Bible says that our old nature is still at war with our new nature (our life in Christ) ([Romans 7, 1 Peter 2:11](#)).
- We are fed lies, nonstop, from the world, the enemy, and even at times from our own heart ([James 1:14, 1 John 2:16, Ephesians 6:11, 16](#)).

As we negotiate these struggles and battles we tend to drift from the core essentials of the Gospel ([Hebrews 2:1, 3:14](#)). We tend to have a **fight or flight** response to conflict and fear. We also see this in how we negotiate the Gospel throughout our life.

If the Gospel is in the center - when we sin and suffer we have a tendency to move to the left or to the right of the Gospel. Our **fight or flight** tendency becomes reality.

Fight - On one side. **we fight**, we move towards **self-sufficiency** / instead of depending on the work of Christ, we begin to depend upon what we have done and upon our accomplishments.

On this side **we de-emphasize grace!** Our acceptance comes from our **performance**.

Another word for this is **self-righteousness**. On this side of the Gospel we begin to perform for God and others. We begin to find our worth in the moral structures we have created in our lives. We often add to commands of Scripture.

Paul writes to the [Galatians](#) and warns them not to add “works righteousness” to the Gospel.

Flight - On the other side **we take flight**, we move away from God's expectations of holiness. We try to justify our sinful behavior. Or find ways of coping with the guilt.

We **abuse grace** and **pretend** that our behaviors are acceptable and understandable. This **self-justification** runs from commands knowing they can't measure up.

Or on this side we can use habits, addictions, or even hobbies to distract ourselves from our sin and suffering.

James writes and reminds his audience of the importance of having a living faith and calls them to repentance.

What does this have to do with unity?

- Much of our infighting comes from these two camps going to war with one another.
- Both are trying to find hope outside of the Gospel.
- Each is fighting as though their life depends on it.
- And both believe they are doing it with good intentions, trying to love the other side.

Both have drifted from the centrality of the Gospel!

The **fighter** needs to hear - put down your fighting gloves - you are fully loved in Christ. There is nothing you can do to **add to that love**.

The one who has **taken flight**—come back—because of Jesus you are loved in your brokenness. There is nothing that you can do that can **remove you from His love**.

Both are reoriented **to do** all that Christ has commanded **in response** to Christ's incredible love knowing they are fully and eternally accepted in Him ([Matthew 28:18-20](#), [John 14:15](#)).

Session 4: Gray Areas – The Cliff

In these Core Classes, we have looked at the Theological Basis for Unity and the need for Theological Triage.

The next question is often, how do we practically live this out with Christian ethics. How do we live in unity while honoring Christian freedom?

- The edge
- Negotiating personal moral decisions
- Understanding influences
- Recognizing one's view of God (a pointing finger or a smiling face?)
- Romans 14 - who is mature, judging, and stumbling?
- Realizing the second edge of the cliff
- Non-negotiable commitments - Unity / Peace / Community / Humility

"In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, and in all things charity."