

Sermon: 10/6/24

“One Body, One Spirit”

John 3:14-17, Ephesians 4:4-16

This is week four of our “Here Comes the Bride” series, and the name of the message today is “One Body, One Spirit.”

That title comes from Ephesians 4, which we just read. And what it means is that if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you are a part of something far bigger and far better than yourself. As Christians, you are a part of a family that numbers in the billions, spread across the whole earth, United by the Holy Spirit that fills us all, and we should all be excited, every day, that we get to be a part of that community.

In the eyes of Christ, his Church is one. We have Unity in him. The problem is that Christians, every one of us, are sinful human beings, with imperfect knowledge and imperfect minds. And that means Christians have come up with countless reasons to dislike and exclude one another since the time of Christ.

I rediscovered an old joke this week that I think illustrates that point well. The author writes **“Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, “Don't do it!” He said, “Nobody loves me.” I said, “God loves you. Do you believe in God?”** He said, **“Yes.”** I said, **“Are you a Christian or a Jew?”** He said, **“A Christian.”** I said, **“Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?”** He said, **“Protestant.”** I said, **“Me, too! What franchise?”** He said, **“Baptist.”** I said, **“Me, too! Northern Baptist or**

Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!"

Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.

It's a silly joke, but the truth within that humor should sting us a little bit. For many Christians, the Kingdom of Heaven is only big enough to hold those who agree with us on every point of doctrine, tradition and practice. But the truth is that heaven is going to be a lot more crowded than some of us would like to believe.

The bible says in Romans 10:9 "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

That is the bar that scripture gives us to be welcomed into the kingdom of God. If someone confesses that Jesus is Lord and believes it in their heart, then they are your brother and sister in Christ. They can disagree with you on every other issue under heaven, but if they get the main thing, Jesus and the Gospel, right, then you are going to spend eternity worshipping alongside them.

Christians love to bicker amongst ourselves. We love to denounce one another. One thing that hurts me as a Pastor is when we seem to take delight when a Christian leader we disagreed with falls. We nudge one another and say “See, I knew that was coming...”

That’s not Christ like. We shouldn’t be rooting for another believer to fail just so we can be proven right.

Jesus said this in John 13:35 “By this all people will know that you are My disciples: if you have love for one another.”

Do we live up to that standard? Have we set an example for the world to follow? Or does the chaos inside the church tend to reflect the chaos in the world around us a little too well.

I hear people all the time complain about the fact that, especially in the south, in the bible belt, you’ll see a Methodist Church, a Baptist Church and a Presbyterian church all stacked up next to one another on the same road. You’ll hear people say “That’s a shame, they should all agree and just be one big church together.”

I don’t think that’s the solution though. Human beings are always going to have differences. Differences lead to diversity, and a diversity of gifts and passions enriches the kingdom of God.

We need seeker-friendly churches and we need traditional churches and we need contemporary churches because the people we are trying to reach are diverse and have diverse backgrounds, and rather than forcing us all into one amorphous blob, we should rejoice that Christ provides different churches that specialize in reaching different groups of people.

Differences of opinion are a part of being human. Conflicts and disagreements will happen until the Lord returns. We're going to read the same passages of scripture and come to different conclusions on its meaning. But our disagreements should never interrupt our fellowship.

The power of our differences to divide us pales in comparison to the power of the savior who unites us. What is holding us together is far stronger than everything that is trying to tear us apart.

As we just read in Ephesians 4. "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; **5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism; **6** one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

And verse 16 reads. 16 "From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

We are One Body, held together by the Holy Spirit. And we are United with one another whether we like it or not.

So maybe Rather than having one big church, doing things one way, perhaps the better picture of unity is to imagine those churches on that street coming together as friends to serve the kingdom of God in a bigger way Together than they ever could individually, just as the different parts of our physical bodies work together for the good of the whole person.

I think Shepherd Church does that very well. We partner with many area churches in kingdom work, and that was an inspiring thing for me to witness once I got here.

Shepherd Church has often been described as not a nondenominational church, but rather an interdenominational church. We have a very wide variety of traditions and theological interpretations represented within our congregation. And though occasionally that leads to disagreement and strife, I think that the good we do together outweighs our occasional bickering, amen?

Shepherd has been a good fit for me because I would describe myself as a uniquely interdenominational believer. I was raised at a church within the Southern Baptist Convention, but one that was by no means your conventional Southern Baptist Church. My home church, where I was baptized, has about 10,000 members, and it was huge even when my family started going there 25 years ago. But I also spent time in my grandparents' churches and they were very traditional baptist churches, and so I was immersed in those traditions as well.

And so I grew up very baptist in my theological convictions, but had plenty of exposure to sort of both ends of the spectrum in terms of what a worship service on Sunday morning looked like. You know what I discovered? I had my preferences, but those churches were preaching the same gospel and worshipping the same God.

But the real curveball for me came in 2020 when a very baptist me was hired the Director of Children's Ministry at Christ the King Church in Durham, NC. And that was a church that had been founded as a Moravian church plant that had, for theological reasons, broken from the Moravian Church the year that I started in order to become a member of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

It was a church that was more liturgical than I was used to, and they had traditions I had never heard of before. I remember being shocked to learn that there was

such a thing as a Church Calendar. I had never observed Lent or a traditional Advent season before I got there; I knew nothing about it. I had never heard of the stations of the cross or of the Chrismon ornaments that they would put up on the tree at Christmas time.

To honor their Moravian roots, Christ the King had a Christmas Eve lovefeast every year, and that's a Moravian tradition that dates back to their German roots in the 1700's. And so I would have to drive up to Winston-Salem to a Moravian bakery to pick up the love feast buns for the love-feast service. People went crazy for them but I thought they tasted like stale hamburger buns.

They sang hymns that I had never heard out of Hymnals I'd never seen before, and they had confirmation classes and practiced infant baptism, and it was a real culture shock for me. But you know what? They preached the same Gospel there, and worshiped the same God and I met some of the best people I have ever known at that church.

After all this time, if you ask me if I still hold to the theological convictions I was brought up in, I would say yes. I'm still probably about 90 percent as baptist as I used to be. But what I have come to discover is that there is room within the Church for disagreement without denunciation.

Families fight, but they're still family, and we should still be able to come together and support one another.

I encourage you to study the bible. Correct interpretation is important. I encourage you to come to your own conclusions about theological issues. Form your

own opinions and positions and be able to defend, lovingly, what you believe. But don't hold your opinions more highly than you hold the believers that you disagree with.

As I mentioned a moment ago, Christ the King Church was a Moravian Church that had become an EPC church. The motto of the Moravian Church, and also of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church is this; In Essentials Unity, in Nonessentials, Liberty.

There are Essential Doctrines within our faith that we all have to agree upon, issues that are definitional to what it means to be a Christian.

In those Essential issues, we must have unity. But in nonessential Issues we should respect the liberty of our brothers and sisters in Christ to disagree with us without being denounced by us.

I would posit this church; the essentials of our faith are clearly evident in scripture for a reason. God made the big things plain; if something isn't plain in scripture, if in fact there is enough ambiguity about a particular issue that two believers who approach the scriptures with reverence are able to read a passage and disagree on its meaning, then God must have not felt strongly enough about that issue to clarify it for us. After all, he wrote the book. He could've put a few more chapters in there if he'd wanted to.

C.S. Lewis once said "There are issues at question between Christians to which I do not think we have been told the answers."

Some arguments are never going to be resolved on this side of heaven because we just don't have the answers yet, and so we have to ask ourselves if the issues we're squabbling over are really worth fighting about at all.

What then are the issues that are worth fighting about? What are the things that all Christians everywhere should agree upon?

If you do your research on this, surprise surprise, you'll find that Christians don't necessarily agree on a set, numbered list. But as I looked, I found that nearly every document was saying the same stuff, and the differences were only in how their thoughts were organized.

So instead of reviewing somebody else's list, Pastor Chris and I got together a while back and came up with our own list of the essentials, six of them. Let's go over these briefly this morning.

Number One, Christians believe that there is one God, one being who is the almighty, all knowing, all good and all present, maker and sustainer of heaven and Earth.

Genesis 1:1 says "In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth. And John 1:3 says "All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him not even one thing came into being that has come into being."

Hebrews 11:6 says "And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for the one who comes to God must believe that He exists, and that he proves to be one who rewards those who seek him."

The belief in One God, Monotheism, is at the center of the Christian faith, and it's affirmed by the scriptures. There are not many Gods, there is only One and there are no other beings like or equal to Him. Deuteronomy 6:4 says "Hear o Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One."

Number Two: Christians believe that Our One Almighty God exists as Three distinct Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is one of the great mysteries of our faith, but we affirm it to be true. We have One God, but he is three persons, each one 100

percent God. The Father is God, the Son is God and the Spirit is God. But the Father is not the Spirit or the Son, the Son is not the Father or the Spirit and the Spirit is not the Son or the Father.

Confused? You're in good company. Luckily, we don't have to understand something in order to believe that it's true. I think it's a point in our favor that Christianity worships as God we can't ever fully understand. I think the gods of other religions are too small for my liking.

At the last Supper, Jesus said these words to his disciples. John 14:8-10 "Philip said to Him "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us. Jesus said to him "Have I been with you for so long a time, and yet you have not come to know me Philip? The one who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say "Show us the Father." Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own, but the Father, as he remains in me, does his works. So Later in verse 16 Jesus says "I will ask the Father and he will give you another Helper, so that he may be with you forever; the Helper is the Spirit of Truth whom the world cannot receive because it does not see him or know him; but you know Him because he remains with you and will be in you."

I've heard it said "the word "trinity" is not in the bible. No, but the evidence of the trinity is in the bible. The Apostles Creed which we read a little while ago, which has its origins in the 2nd Century Ad, nearly two thousand years ago, affirmed the existence of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is something that Christians have believed since the birth of the church, and it makes Christianity unique among all the religions of the world.

Third, to become a Christian and receive salvation you must affirm the gospel, and the Gospel, the Good News, is this, that the man Jesus Christ of Nazareth was God the Son, God the Word, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. He came to this earth to pay the price for our sins, becoming God in Flesh through the working of the Holy Spirit in the Virgin Mary. John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting light.” There is no other means under heaven by which we can be saved from our sin, for all men sinned and carried the penalty of both physical and spiritual death upon their souls. Jesus paid our debt by suffering on the cross, and three days later he rose, bodily, from the grave and has now ascended to heaven. Because of him, the Gates of Heaven are open to us.

I’ve said this before, and I’ll say it again, To be a Christian is not to say that Jesus was a great teacher among many others. A great man among other great men. Christians believe that Jesus was God, and that he has provided the only way to be reconciled with God.

Number four, Christians have to believe in the authority of scripture. Without a high view of the word of God, we have no foundation upon which to base our beliefs. If the bible is an error ridden document that is out of date and can’t be trusted, then why should we accept the things it tells us about Jesus?

Denominations do differ on **how much** authority scripture has, but at the very least Christians do have to accept scripture’s testimony about Jesus in order to receive salvation in the first place. As for me, I believe, and Shepherd Church as a body affirms, the authority of God’s written word as a whole. 2 Timothy 3:16 says “All scripture is inspired by God and beneficial for teaching, for rebuke, for correction and for training in

righteousness.” And the bylaws of Shepherd Church make this statement “Like the first Christian disciples, we affirm the Bible to be the Word of God, and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine and conduct.”

Number five, Christians believe in the Great Commission. We are commanded to take the message of Jesus, the Gospel, and spread it to every corner of the globe. From its beginning, Christianity has been missional in nature. The Kingdom of God is a growing one, and we are commanded to contribute to that growth. Whether it is your neighbor next door or a family in Africa thousands of miles away, the Church is called to make disciples in every nation. This is the Great Commission. Matthew 28:19-20 says “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

You are not meant to keep your faith to yourself. It’s not a gift that we hoard for ourselves, it’s medicine that can save a dying world.

Number six, I believe the unity of the church is an essential doctrine in and of itself. We are all a part of one body, the Church with a capital C. Divided as we are, flawed as we are, we are one large, dysfunctional, yet wholly redeemed, family.

All Christians believe more things than just these essentials. There are many important issues that aren’t essential that we should still try to get right. Study is important. Discussion is important. Correction is important.

So do your best to get it right, and to correct your neighbor if you think they’ve stayed on something. But understand we’ll never get it completely right on Earth.

In heaven, when our knowledge is perfected, we'll learn who was right and wrong about everything. But here on Earth, where perfect agreement isn't possible, we should strive to be known by our love for one another. Conflict should not define the church of Christ.

As you might have gathered from my background, I like to take in a lot of different Christian voices and hear different takes on the issues, and that has led me to listen occasionally to a Calvinist theologian and apologist named James White on youtube. And James White gets into it pretty often with a Christian philosopher and apologist named William Lane Craig, who is a founder of the ministry Reasonable Faith.

Both these men are defenders of the faith, but both these men have very different takes on theology and biblical interpretation, And they can be pretty heated in their disagreements.

But I was touched once by something I heard James White say about Dr. Craig, and I'll be paraphrasing his statements here because this comes from a youtube video instead of a written source.

When someone asked James White whether or not he thought Dr. Craig was a Christian, he said this. "Dr Craig has stances on theology and the Bible that I find offensive. We disagree on a lot of very important issues. But there is a difference between an important issue and a definitional issue. Lots of issues are important; only a few are definitional. William Lane Craig and I agree on the definitional doctrines of our faith and so despite our differences I believe that William Lane Craig is a believer on the side of the angels."

Is that not the model for unity within the bride of Christ? We should study the bible. We should get things right. We should have discussions, we should correct one another, but at the end of the day, if we agree on the essentials, then we are all a part of the Family of God, and all of our disagreements are just petty family squabbles that will be settled in heaven one day.

Do we really want to stand before the Lord at the end of the ages and hear him say “Well you were right about baptism, but you never loved your neighbors. You were right about communion, but you turned my children away from the table. You got all the intellectual stuff right, but you did not love each other well enough.

When we get to heaven, the first thing that we do won't be to turn to our neighbors and elbow them and say, “I told you so.” The first thing we'll do is fall down on our knees, with our brothers and sisters beside us, saying “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty, and Worthy is the Lamb who was Slain” ,and together with billions of voices we'll sing together as One Body perfectly united in One Spirit. Amen. Let's Pray.

Lord, I pray that your church would be One, just as the Father and the Son are One. And we give you praise that no the gates of Hell will never triumph over your church; Satan seeks to divide, but he cannot pull apart that which you have glued together. Help us to be known by our love for one another. Amen.