

## **The Journey of Transformation** Raymond L. Fox

*Something to reflect on, comment on, and even practice on your journey.*



### **A Facade of Unity**

A group of people who wait together on the street corner for the same bus every morning, believing it will soon come, might feel connected to each other by the brief moments they spend together. They might even learn each other's names and discover some details about their lives while they are waiting. But they would have to admit that any connection they feel among themselves is only superficial. In a similar way, a group of Christians who meet in the same place for brief moments once or twice a week to share in some activities and chat together for a few minutes might experience a bond connecting them. Unfortunately, this level of connection too easily serves as a facade hiding hearts troubled by impatience, bitterness, envy, and even animosity.

The Pharisees, who opposed Jesus, would have been satisfied if bullying their people produced a uniform but superficial obedience among all the Jews of Palestine with respect to the Pharisees' rules about not working on the Sabbath. In contrast to their focus on externals, Jesus taught that what we practice, including unity, must begin on the inside, with who we are in our hearts and spirits (Matthew 15:17-29). Just like our transformation to live new lives as children of the Father, genuine unity among believers happens from the inside out. In fact, believers become profoundly connected to each other as a result of first surrendering themselves to be transformed in the image of their Father.

Paul addressed his Ephesian letter to Christians who had come from extremely different cultures and faiths. He explained that the purpose of Jesus was to break down the walls that separated them, including not just distinctive beliefs and traditions but, first of all, the attitudes of their hearts. Envy, prejudice, and animosity had previously divided the Jews and Gentiles who now made up the Ephesian congregation. He wrote, "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3 ESV).

“Unity of the Spirit” is inside-out unity that comes from the Spirit of God who lived in each of them (Ephesians 2:22). The Spirit’s purpose for dwelling in them was to bring them, step-by-step, to transformation in the image of Jesus and the Father, empowering them to love as the Father loves (Ephesians 3:14-19). Each step of progress that the members of Jesus’ church in Ephesus made in growing up to be like their Father would also further unite them in their hearts and spirits.

In abstract terms, Paul described unity of the Spirit as “one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6). But what do these abstract terms look like when they guide the lives of believers in concrete ways? Paul provided the answer when he wrote, “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 4:31-5:2).

Since there is one Lord Jesus, we permit his teachings to bring about the same transformation in all of us. Because there is one Spirit, we ask the same Spirit to strengthen us to live consistently in patience, compassion and humility. There is one God who is our Father and, together, we desire to be transformed in his image. This is unity from the inside out.

The members of the Ephesian congregation would face many challenges as they struggled to put away traditions and practices that had identified them in their previous lives as Jews and Gentiles. But if they first surrendered their hearts and spirits to be transformed in the image of their Father, they would be able to solve differences with patience and peace. We deceive ourselves with a facade of unity if we focus on resolving external differences without first transforming our hearts. We will discover, sooner or later, that division persists when hearts are not changed.

Next week: What can we practice together to achieve unity of the Spirit?

## About Raymond

Raymond L. Fox has been teaching about transformation in the image of Jesus for forty-five years, in the U.S. and abroad. He has written two books, *Fruit of the Spirit* and *Love Your Neighbor as Yourself*. His work also includes character counseling and mentoring in juvenile detention facilities. He has degrees in philosophy and education.



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