

The Journey of Transformation Raymond L. Fox

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



Unity from the Inside Out

In the previous essay, we considered the danger of becoming content with a facade of unity in Jesus' church, satisfying ourselves with coming together for worship to practice the same activities together and even singing in perfect harmony while our hearts may be divided by jealousy, impatience, and judgment. Cultivating a genuine unity between the members of God's family begins as we all wholly commit our hearts to becoming children who reflect our Father.

Our individual commitment to reflect our Father's compassion, patience, and forgiveness first brings us into harmony with the desires of his heart. Our transformation is the desire of his Spirit: "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18). As we focus our lives on the practice of the fruit of the Spirit, such as love, joy, peace, and patience, we walk in harmony with his Spirit and have our minds set on what the Spirit desires (Galatians 5:22-25; Romans 8:5).

As each heart is dedicated to the desire of the Father's heart and learns to practice his love toward others, including those who have not yet come to know him, the members of the Father's family achieve what the apostle Paul describes as "unity of the Spirit"—*of* the Spirit because it comes from living in harmony with the Spirit. In contrast to a facade of unity, unity of the Spirit is from the inside out, manifesting itself as being "completely humble, gentle, and patient, bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2-3).

If we can imagine how much attention we pay to training voices to sing in harmony, we might have an idea of how difficult it is to train hearts to practice unity of the Spirit in the body of Christ. Here are some necessary strategies for achieving this precious goal:

Transformation as a group effort. Though we are individually responsible for living in the image of the Father, we need each other in the body for counseling, encouraging, and teaching each other. We understand we cannot see ourselves as others see us, and we do not all have the same level of experience. For this reason, the writer of Hebrews advises his readers to help each other mature as children of the Father: "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24).

Transparency and freedom for vulnerability. We can most effectively help each other practice the image of the Father when we feel safe to be transparent and vulnerable enough to admit our weaknesses without the fear of judgment or rejection. Paul provided practical advice for creating an atmosphere of trust: "Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted" (Galatians 6:1). If someone is having a problem with anger, envy, or bitterness, small group and one-on-one conversations provide even more freedom for transparency.

Gracious communication. Forming the body of Christ into a refuge from destructive criticism and judgment depends on gracious communication. To show grace toward someone who is struggling to learn to love means giving the gifts of compassion, patience, and forgiveness expressed with the language of gentleness and kindness. Paul counsels Christians to "let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone" (Colossians 4:6).

Challenging goals. When the members of the body are not afraid of making mistakes because they know their brothers and sisters will forgive them, they have the confidence to confront more challenging moments to practice the unconditional love modeled by Jesus. James wrote that, "The testing of your faith produces perseverance" (James 1:3). This principle is certainly true regarding the faith we need to continue loving even those who do not respond to our love.

Celebrate your joy. We must not forget to celebrate together in the body of Christ when one of our fellow disciples experiences a moment of overcoming a challenge and loving as the Father loves. In this way the joy of the body of Christ is also the joy of the Spirit (Romans 14:17) who rejoices with us as we learn to love.

Do not be satisfied with a facade of unity; it is meaningless in comparison to the unity of the Spirit that begins within our hearts and manifests itself in our transformed lives as believers and the radiant power of the body of Christ to show the beauty of the Father's love.

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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