

Unified in Purpose

Scriptures: Acts 4:32-33; John 17:20-23

"Why does the church exist? The purpose of the church is to win the world for Jesus Christ. We miss the purpose and so have conflict, confusion, and stagnation in many churches today. Nothing precedes purpose. The starting point for every church should be the question, "Why do we exist?" Until we know what our church exists for, we will have no foundation, no motivation, no direction, and no unity.

The early church knew why they existed. And they were unified about that purpose. *"Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and soul . . . And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was on all of them"* (Acts 4: 32, 33). Jesus had enlisted these followers not to a life of leisure, but to a life of service. While each had a different task they all had the same calling: to fulfill the Great Commission in their generation. They had one leader - Jesus, one purpose - to communicate the gospel to all people. These early disciples did more for the spread of Christianity than any generation of followers since. What was their secret?

I. THEY HAD UNITY IN THE CHURCH OF GOD (Acts 4:32).

All the believers shared in this unity. Not just the apostles. Not just the leaders. All the believers were unified. There was a fundamental solidarity of love and purpose. To be one in heart and mind is to be unified in every fiber of their being.

A They were family in relationship

They shared the same spiritual father - God Almighty. They shared a spiritual birth - they were born again into the family of God

B. They were friends in fellowship

They shared their lives and their possessions with one another. It went beyond a kind word and a pat on the back. They gave priority to meeting the physical and practical needs that were evident in the community.

C. They were followers of Christ in partnership

These men and women shared an enterprise together. They did not assemble merely for family gatherings, or for making sure their physical needs were met. They came together in order to attain an objective. These men and women were partners in reaching the world for Christ. They linked arms not just for their convenience and their comfort and their support but to reach out to those not yet linked up with them

The members of a church are a group of people from various backgrounds with different interests and different perspectives who have been called together for a purpose. That purpose is to cooperate together in reaching out beyond our walls so others can know the love of Jesus Christ. We are in the life-saving business. That endeavor is accomplished best when we understand that we are a family of friends in partnership with each other.

II. THEY EXPERIENCED THE POWER OF GOD (Acts 4:33)

Purpose is the power in the engine of life. Purpose assures us that the steering wheel is connected to the engine. Without purpose, there is a motion without emotion. There is activity without accomplishment. There is efficiency without effectiveness.

Think of light for a moment. Diffused light has no power at all. But by focusing the power of the sun through a magnifying glass, we can set a leaf on fire. And when light is concentrated at even a higher level, like a laser beam, it can even cut through a block of steel.

The early disciples had a laser-like focus to their purpose and the corresponding result was power - the dynamite of God.

A. The power was evidenced by the growth of the church

In a matter of weeks, the church went from the Upper Room to every living room in Jerusalem. It is estimated by scholars that during the first twenty-five years of the Jerusalem church, it grew from 120 people to over 100,000 people. That's power manifested.

B. The power was evidenced by their ability to withstand satanic assault

As soon as the Spirit came upon the church, Satan launched a ferocious counterattack. Pentecost was followed by persecution. First, there was **physical violence** as church leaders were thrown into prison. Second, there was **moral corruption**, evidenced through Ananias and Sapphira to insinuate evil into the interior life of the church, and thus ruin the fellowship. Third, there was the subtle ploy of professional **distraction** to deflect the apostles from their priority of prayer and preaching by preoccupying them with social administration, which was not their

calling. In each case the church withstood the attack and stayed true to its purpose of reaching people for Christ.

C. The power was evidenced by their finding strength in diversity

The early Christians quickly realized that their diversity could either be a source of division or a source of power. They choose the latter. They were not all alike. There was a plethora of opinion, a wide assortment of gifts, but they found ways to integrate their differences into a symphonic whole - to create a singleness of spirit, of identity, and of purpose whose unifying center was Christ.

In short, they resembled a symphony. They may have played different notes from the person sitting next to them. But their variety and diversity created a more magnificent sound than if they were all on the same instrument, playing the same note. Unity exists amid diversity because we all follow the same musical score.

III. THEY DISCOVERED THE FAVOR OF GOD (Acts 4:33)

Because the early disciples were unified in purpose, and because they were committed to the task of reaching the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ, God smiled down on them with favor. ". . . and great grace was on all of them" (Acts 4:33). Grace, as you know, means unmerited love or favor. Because they were generous God was generous. Because their heart broke over the same things that broke the heart of God, God smiled upon them. Because they held in high esteem the purpose of Jesus, God held them in high esteem.

It seems to me that there exists - both as individuals and a church - a direct correlation between our faithfulness to God's plan and God's favor in our lives. If we want to experience God's blessings we need to first be obedient to his purpose. Novelist Robin Jones Gunn said, "If you agree to say yes to God's purpose for your life, you'll never be bored again with Jesus Christ."

IV. THEY WERE THE ANSWER TO THE PRAYER OF JESUS (John 17:20-21, 23)

And finally, on the last night of his life, Jesus prayed a prayer that stands as a citadel for all Christians: "*I pray not only for these, but also for those who believe in Me through their message. May they all be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I am in You. May they also be one in Us, so the world may believe You sent Me. . . . I am in them and You are in Me. May they be made completely one, so the world may know You have sent Me and have loved them as You have loved Me*" (John 17:20-21, 23).

These words are precious. Knowing the end was near, Jesus prayed one final time for his followers. With death breathing down his neck, Jesus prayed not for their success, their safety, or their happiness. He prayed for their unity, as they would fulfill his purpose. He prayed that they would love each other, as they went forward to love the world to him. He prayed for his disciples and for all those who would come to faith in Jesus Christ, becoming his followers. That means you and me. In his last prayer Jesus prayed that you and I be one.

Of all the lessons, we can draw from these verses, don't miss the most important: Unity matters to God. The Father does not want his kids to squabble. Disunity disturbs him. Why? *"By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another"* (John 13:35). Unity creates belief. How will the world believe that God sent Jesus? Not if we agree with each other. Not if we solve every controversy. But if we love each other.

If unity creates belief, then disunity fosters disbelief. How can the world come to believe the gospel if those who already believe it are battling among themselves?

Disunity is not merely a scandal for unbelievers; it is also a stumbling block for them coming to faith. Paul Billheimer may very well be right when he says: "The continuous and widespread fragmentation of the Church has been the scandal of the ages. It has been Satan's master strategy. The sin of disunity probably has caused more souls to be lost than all other sins combined." Could it be that unity is the key to reaching the world for Christ?

If unity is the key to fulfilling the God-ordained purpose of spreading the message of Jesus Christ, shouldn't it have precedence in our prayers? If unity matters to God, then shouldn't unity matter to us? If unity is a priority in heaven, then shouldn't it be a priority on earth?

Nowhere, by the way, are we told to build unity. We are instructed simply to keep unity. From God's perspective, there is but ". . . one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16). Unity does not need to be created; it simply needs to be protected.

How do we do that? How do we make every effort to keep the unity? Does that mean we compromise our convictions? No. Does that mean we abandon the truths we cherish? No. But it does mean we look long and hard at the attitudes we carry. Unity doesn't begin in examining others but in examining self. Unity begins, not in demanding that others change, but in admitting that we aren't perfect ourselves. Unity grows as we learn to accept others' differences and to forgive when wronged. Unity continues as we humbly serve those who are different. Unity is fulfilled as focus on who we believe in rather than what we believe in. Unity is favored as we lovingly take the message of Jesus Christ to a divided world. That's our purpose. Let's be unified in it.