

Tear Down This Wall!

Why Disunity Disembowels the Church
and How to Avoid It

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Divide and Conquer

Divide and conquer is one of the most effective strategies of battle. When an enemy is too strong, the way to weaken him is to cause the troops to scatter in different directions. Scattered factions can do little to stand strong.

Most people have heard the story of William Wallace. In 1297, England was establishing its authority around the world. Scotland was claimed for the British crown and the tribal clans could do little to remain free. There were nothing more than tribesmen divided into varying sects. They warred among themselves and had no unity. None of Scotland's tribes wanted to be under the rule of a foreign king, but this appeared to be inevitable.

William Wallace and Andrew de Moray went on a mission to unite Scotland's tribes, and when the nation stood as one, they were able to defeat their invaders and claim independence. While they remained isolated by sects, they had no power, but with a united front, they were a force to be reckoned with.

The opposite is also true. Consider the Roman Empire. The empire that once ruled the civilized world of its era was an unstoppable force. Then the kingdom divided. Two warring sides picked different emperors. As time went on, the regions began to rebel and Rome soon imploded upon itself. Though it had moments of regrouping, the empire soon became too divided to stand. Jesus also addressed this in **Matthew 12:25**

But Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them:
“Every kingdom divided against itself is brought
to desolation, and every city or house divided
against itself will not stand.”

This is true for every kingdom. A people united can stand against strong foes, and a kingdom divided has little power. What sects cannot do, a united people can.

Satan understands this. The church has the promise that the gates of hell cannot stand against the church,¹ yet the church is losing its battle against spiritual warfare. Keep in mind that a gate is a defensive barrier, not an offensive weapon. When a kingdom is in danger, it falls back into a defensive position and tries to find protection behind strong gates. A kingdom only comes out to battle when it is in a position of strength.

The picture Jesus presented to the church is that we are battling an enemy who has already been defeated. Though the church has always had persecution in the world, the church has always had the upper hand. As the Bible says, “The weapons of our warfare are not physical, but are mighty in God for pulling down strongholds.”² All the enemy has left are physical weapons, but they can do little against the power of God. We don’t have physical weaponry, yet the enemy cannot stand. He is reduced to falling behind the stronghold of the gates of hell and lamenting as the church walks through the breaches as they follow God’s power.

¹ Matthew 16:18

² 2 Corinthians 10:4

Consider the picture God gave us when God's people faced the mighty walls of Jericho. This was an impenetrable city. Yet God never called His people to attack the walls. God only called the people to walk by faith. God took out the walls of Jericho when the people trusted in His plan, and the walls that were once a barrier became steps for the people to walk up to take the city.³

This is also the message for the church walking in God's power. The forces of darkness may try to find strength in their physical defenses, but these are powerless against the might of God.

Yet we no longer see this happening. During the era of the Roman Empire, when the first century church was spreading into the unbelieving culture, several Roman Emperors declared war against the church. Nero was the first to use the might of Rome to persecute the church. He ordered the execution of the Apostle's Peter and Paul. Following Nero's hatred of Christians, Domitian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Septimius Severus, Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian also used Rome's power to try to stamp out Christianity. They incited people against the church by blaming Christians for Rome's problems, expelled them from military and public service, and launched campaigns to hunt down and kill Christians. Some permitted Christians to recant, others did not. Very few Christians recanted their faith.

The Apostle Bartholomew was crucified twice. He was nailed to a cross, and after some time the emperor ordered him down. The goal was likely to break his

³ Joshua 6:20

spirit, but Bartholomew wasn't swayed. After recovering, he went out to share the good news again. Later, he was captured again. When he refused to recant, he was flayed alive, and then crucified a second time.

The average Christian doesn't understand what we have been given. Satan is bound to using inferior weapons against us. Not one emperor succeeded. When all was done, Rome was in shambles and the church was stronger than ever.

Nothing has changed. We still have what the early church had. Spiritual wickedness is still defeated. The kingdom of darkness, though spiritual in nature, is limited to the power of physical weapons – which have no power against the church.

How is it that the early church had no political power or worldly influence, but turned the world upside-down, yet even with political power, the modern church is losing the war for the culture? The answer is simple – we have been distracted from our mission and are fighting among ourselves.

Bickering and internal fightings existed in the early church, but the church learned to deal with this in healthy ways. Today's church is not so effective. There is no unified church. Each faction is so busy fighting other factions that the mission has long been forgotten. We are more interested in fighting to erect walls of division and over our favorite form of denominationalism than our interest in uniting under Christ.

As of this writing, there are more than 30,000 denominations in the world. These denominations are usually opposed to other denominations. Then within denominations, people rise up and call for war against fellow believers. “Those people believe [name the error or accusation].” Those who don’t subscribe to the right ideology are called heretics, and once someone is put under a label, fleshly minded people think it’s okay to persecute them.

Books, internet sights, national broadcasts, and other methods are being employed to call for war against other believers. One recent national broadcast warned its viewers, “These heretics are coming after your churches. They will be targeting your loved ones. You’re children’s very souls are at risk of being lost unless we stop them.” Then the call to war was issued.

Is this the gospel? Fight against your brethren? Or are well-meaning people being manipulated by the enemy to divide the church to make it a kingdom incapable of standing. A church disemboweled of love for one another is reduced to a squabbling bunch of tribes that can be easily overrun.

What’s more is that anyone who points out the Bible’s command for love and unity is labeled as an ecumenical and then tossed into the heretic box. It’s sedition against Christ masquerading as a defense of the faith.

It’s not your job to defend the faith. God does not need you to protect Him or His gospel. It is today as it has always been – His word will stand.

People misuse scriptures to justify fighting with fellow believers by claiming they are defenders of the faith. Yet in every situation where the Bible mentions the concept of 'defending the gospel', it is always related to defending our hope as a testimony to those who are opposed to the gospel. It is ALWAYS related to people outside the church opposing our allegiance to Christ instead of to the culture or someone's form of religion. Let's look at each time the concept of defending the faith is mentioned.

- Acts 7:24 – Stephen is defending his hope to the Jews preparing to stone him.
- Acts 19:33 – Alexander prepares to give a defense to an idolatrous culture who claimed he was defiling their goddess.
- Acts 22:1 – Paul is being accused of breaking the law and is prepared to defend himself by pointing to Christ.
- Acts 26:24 – Paul presents his defense to King Festus, proving that he did not break any laws.
- 1 Corinthians 9:3 – Paul speaks of his defense mentioned in Acts.
- Philippians 1:7 and 1:17 – Paul speaks about defending himself against his accusers and his willingness to suffer.
- 2 Timothy 4:16 – Paul again speaks of having to defend his faith in Christ.
- 1 Peter 3:15 – Peter instructs the church to have an answer for those who question our hope in Christ.

Do you see anyone defending the gospel by attacking someone else? Do you notice anything missing from the 'defense of the gospel'? Not one time is the person defending God. It is always the person defending the reason they hope in Christ. Yet we have redefined the word 'defense' to mean 'offense'. Those claiming to be defenders of the faith are on offense, not defense. They are attacking others, not presenting a well-reasoned defense for the hope they have in Christ.

Consider **1 Peter 3:15**

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and
always *be* ready to *give* a defense to everyone
who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you,
with meekness and fear;

What is the focus of this passage? Is it a call to attack anyone who doesn't teach what we think is accurate? Is it a call to search out and destroy heretics? Is it a call to put labels on others so we can separate them into sects that we can then criticize and destroy? Is it a call to protect God?

The defense of the gospel is always you understanding why you believe the truth, and to be prepared to explain your hope to a culture that views Christianity as a threat. They are accusing you of evil, and you are defending your hope by sharing the good news of Christ.

Somehow the aggressors are calling themselves defenders while they attack those that don't fit within their sect. Defending the faith has been reduced to

drawing dividing lines and separating 'us' from 'those people'. It's now being used to expel fellow Christians from the body because we have decided they aren't saved according to our judgment of their heart and intentions.

I am also guilty. There was a time when I was caught up into the search and destroy mindset. Looking back, I'm not sure why this seemed so important. I was distracted from Christ, so my attention was drawn to other things. My attitude changed when I got a full glimpse of the fact that I am completely dependent upon Christ for everything. Then as I became more focused on Christ, I began to leave that way of thinking behind. Soon I began to realize that while I thought I was defending God, I was actually fighting against my brethren – which God has forbidden.

What's more is that error is never corrected by focusing on error. How does a lost person discover their need for Christ? Is it by rubbing their nose in sin? I've met many people who hated themselves, acknowledged how reprehensible their behavior was, but never changed. Many of these completely rejected Christ. When I was in the military, I had a fellow soldier who was miserable to the point of suicide. After several suicide attempts, the army began processing him out of the military.

On his last day before leaving the military, I saw him sitting alone in the dayroom. I sat with him and tried to share Christ. He was sullen and miserable. When I sat beside him, he just had a hollow stare. He readily admitted he was miserable. He hated himself, life, and

all he had done. I shared Jesus and he said, “I appreciate what you are trying to do, but I have no interest in religion.” He even quoted a few scriptures to show he knew the gospel message.

He knew he was a sinner. He knew his life was hopeless. Yet nothing changed. Do you know when people are changed? When they get a glimpse of the goodness of God. When we share the truth of God’s love, if someone gets a vision of this as reality, it changes everything.

My life was changed when my grandmother began talking about the goodness of God. I didn’t want to hear it. I begged to leave, but she wanted to talk for ‘just a few minutes’. She didn’t tell me I was a sinner. I already knew that. I loved using God’s name with foul language. I thought I was cool for my rebellion. I hated the gospel. I was raised in church, but I was on the fast-track to hell. And I didn’t care.

She reminisced about how much Jesus meant to her and talked about her hope. I sat there bored, waiting for her to just shut up. But then something stirred in my heart and I began to listen. In a moment, I believed and was changed. I walked away from that conversation without the foul mouth I walked in with. And I didn’t try to change anything.

That’s how the gospel works. This is why the book of Romans says, “It’s the goodness of the Lord that leads you to repentance.” Truth has no rivals. The Spirit of God has no rival. Error cannot survive amongst the truth. That’s why Satan’s strategy is to get people

focused on the error instead of the truth. While we are bashing someone's error, Satan has the victory.

Has any Catholic changed into a protestant because someone said that the Pope was the antichrist? Or that Mary is an idol? Has any Charismatic become a Baptist because they are belittled for their view of the Holy Spirit? Has a Baptist become Spirit-filled because a Charismatic called him dead and lifeless?

Name any denominational or doctrinal difference that has been changed because someone was called a heretic.

I look at my own life as an example. Many changes have occurred during my spiritual growth. In the last five years, my personal growth has increased exponentially. Many dearly held beliefs have been discarded as foolish along the way. Not one belief changed because someone told me I was wrong. Many erroneous ways of thinking withstood a lot of criticism. I once considered myself an apologist (or defender of the faith) and enjoyed debating with others – including atheists, other religions, and other Christians.

Many things I was certain was right turned out to be wrong. And I didn't realize this during debates. As I grew in the word, I began to find irreconcilable differences between my beliefs and scriptures. Today I still have discussions about doctrine with people who have differing viewpoints, but instead of bashing each other with doctrinal hammers, we fellowship over coffee and the word. I've discovered some perspectives I never considered, and have been able to share perspectives with people I would never have otherwise

been able to dialog with. Even when we both are convinced that our understanding is the right one, we remain friends and brethren.

I have had fellowship and conversations with people who held beliefs I knew were faulty, and over time was able to share with them the reason why. At times I discover my own misconceptions. Ultimately, everything has to point to Christ and our hope. Some perspectives die hard. But those who are confident in truth are not fearful of error. We see the opportunity to share truth, and our goal isn't to rebuke a heretic, but we want others to share in our discovery of the things that create a deeper fellowship with God.

It's okay if someone has misconceptions of scripture. It's also okay for us to be wrong – and it's okay to admit it. As long as we don't lose sight of our ultimate goal, to bring others into a deeper fellowship with Christ, then differences are not a big deal.

The beginning of the end of my apologetics came from a letter I received through my website. At that time, about 90% of my sight was dedicated to apologetics. In case you aren't familiar with this word, it comes from the passage in Peter we looked at earlier. The word 'defense' comes from the Greek word 'apologia' which the church uses for the word apologetics. It's one of the passages that can be taken out of context to produce the misconception of defending the faith.

I posted a study about the love of God and someone emailed me to tell me they had accepted Christ. They had been opposed to Christianity, and they

were doing an internet search and came across this study. Something clicked and they said it changed their life.

My site had been up for around five years at this point. I had about thirty-thousand pages of apologetics. I was getting nearly 100,000 hits a month. I frequently got letters from other apologists praising me for my boldness and providing them with material. But I had never had anyone say, "Your argument changed my life." Five years and 30,000 pages and not one person's life was changed. I put up one study on the love of God and someone who claimed to be an enemy of Christianity was touched. Something was wrong with my message.

There is a place for sharing facts with people that affirm the reliability of the Bible and I don't doubt that God calls certain people to dig out these truths. But looking back I had to admit that the subtle driving force behind my 'defense' was pride. I would never have admitted this and I didn't recognize it at the time, but being right was more important than expressing the love of God. A love that He said is the greatest witness to the world. Consider the words of Jesus in **John 13:34-35**

³⁴ "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

³⁵ "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Let me lay out what has become the realization for me. The goodness of God leads people to repentance. The world – those who do not know Christ – will recognize that we belong to Jesus because of our love for each other. And we think that calling for war against our brethren is defending the faith? I thought arguing and disproving would reveal Christ and drive others to the truth?

It's the opposite. Presenting the love of God drives people to repentance, and showing love to other Christians is the proof that God is real and that I have His love in my life. Man. I was way off. And so is most of the church. While we are battling over differences, many of which we have created out of assumptions and misconceptions of scripture, the world is looking at us and saying, "What is this love of God? You guys hate each other, so why would I want to get involved in your drama?"

The evidence that we are disciples of Christ is not our doctrine, denomination, or skill in debating. There is only one thing Jesus said would convince the world we are truly in the truth – love of one another. Only the supernatural love of God can bridge denominational lines, cultural barriers, and racial conflicts. If I am not revealing the love of Christ among my brethren, I have abandoned the mission, no matter how much work I do for God.

Divide and conquer is the strategy of the enemy. The only way the church can fail to see fruit and the power of God is to allow ourselves to be distracted from

the foundation of Christianity – the love of God. Take to heart the words of **1 Corinthians 13:13**

And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these *is* love.

The greatest thing in the Christian faith is love – agape. It is the love of God revealed to us, and then through us. The next chapter of 1 Corinthians begins with the words, “Pursue love.” This is the first calling of the church and your individual calling. It begins with pursuing love (agape). If you begin serving God from any other starting point, you have missed the gospel.

Apologetics has its place, and that begins with pursuing love. Teaching correct doctrine begins with pursuing love. Resolving conflict in the church and daily life begins with pursuing love. If your goal is to pursue love, everything else falls into place. Without the pursuit of love, even our good intentions fall outside of God’s will.

From this basic understanding, let’s look at how the Bible establishes unity and our call to be united, first to Christ and then to each other.

Love is a Command

One-hundred and eighty-three times in the New Testament we are instructed to love. Love is the foundation of Christianity, for everything we have originates from the love of God. Twice in 1 John we are told that God is love. Because God is love, everything God does is ultimately an expression of His love. Even judgment serves as a disciplinary action that drives us away from the things that prevent us from experiencing God's love.

All we must do is look at parenthood and we can understand judgment. Certainly I am going to make my children obey me, and the goal behind my discipline is their good. I don't want them to enter into adulthood with bad attitudes, bad habits, nor do I want them to be ill-equipped for life. I make them suffer consequences now so they won't have worse consequences later. Punishment makes bad behavior less desirable so they can see the value of good behavior. A child left to himself or herself will rarely choose the right way. They must be guided to it through both positive and negative reinforcements until they mature in their thinking.

We tend to call it punishment, but this falls short of the real meaning behind corrective action. It's correction, not punishment. Or at least it should be. God is more interested in your eternal good than your temporal pleasures. If He were uncaring, then He would let you go your own way without consequences until you discover what you've missed.

I say all of this because people have a tendency to think of God as a harsh judge. The harshness is either our assumptions of God, or the harder consequences we face when we refuse to yield to correction.

God doesn't love you because of what you do, can do, or who you are. God loves you because that is who He is. God is love, and because it's His nature to love, He expresses His nature to us without conditions. The only reason people don't experience God's love is because of their own conditions, not God's. Until we feel worthy, we aren't willing to accept God's love. Or if we are distracted by the temptations of the world, we turn our back on God's love. None of this changes who God is. God loves because He is love. That is His nature.

In the same way, anyone who is in Christ is born again from God's nature. In Christ, our old nature is buried and taken out of the way, and we are given a new nature that is born of God, is a partaker of God's nature, and whose life is always in God. A Christian loves because it is in their nature to love. If our nature is of God and in God – and God is love, then our nature also contains the love of God. We can begin to understand this concept by looking at **Romans 5:5**

Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

You have the love of God within you. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and you can now love with the love of God by taking what God has given you and expressing it

toward others. Until the Spirit of God abides in us, we are incapable of expressing the love of God.

Let's stop for a moment and define love. The Bible describes human love with the word 'philia'. Philia love is warm affection and friendship love. When the Bible commands us to love, it is always the word 'agape'. Agape is the love of God and is described as unconditional, outward focused, and not self-serving. To get a full definition of agape, read 1 Corinthians 13. Until God pours His love into our hearts by the Spirit, we are incapable of answering the command to love. This is what the Bible is explaining in **1 John 4:7-9**

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

⁸ He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

⁹ In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him.

Notice the first principle being taught here. Love is of God. The evidence that we are born of God is that we now possess God's love and can express agape toward others. God made His love manifest to us, and now it is made manifest in us because we have been born of God. What was once outside of us, is now revealed in us and this is the evidence we are in God. Without love (agape) we would be just like the rest of the world. Our love would be conditional and based on whether we felt someone was worthy of love.

Let's add to this discussion by looking at **John 13:34-35**

³⁴ "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

³⁵ "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Jesus is affirming what we just read in 1 John. Notice the new command is based on a new revelation of God's love. Jesus imparted His love to His disciples, and for that reason He gave a new command – take the love they have received through Christ and love others with Jesus' love. "As I have loved you...you also love one another."

God is commanding you, the person of faith in Christ, to take the love He has given you and express His love toward others. This begins with the household of faith, but continues outward to our neighbors outside of faith.

Let me use an illustration I shared in a previous book. Many times I have encountered people in the church that did not suit my personality. The first time this principle of 'loving as I have received' came to life to me was when a new person showed up in church that was a bit hard to get along with. He was overbearing, confrontational, and he seemed to grate on my nerves. It wasn't only my nerves, but others began conflicting with him as well.

After one encounter with him, I went home and thought about this. I could not philia him – love him with

my human affection – because my flesh did not like him. Yet I was certain he was a believer. He even had some good insights from his own spiritual life experiences and I had no doubt his faith was genuine. There was no way to avoid him. I didn't enjoy being around him. I began to feel badly about hoping he would just leave. Is this love? Wanting someone to just go away?

As the Lord would have it, I had been studying these very things I'm discussing here, and I knew God was putting me into a position to learn something. Hundreds of times I have read, quoted, and even taught from these passages. I knew this was real, but when I met this difficult man, I realized I didn't truly understand what the Bible was teaching about my command to love.

I began praying about this and felt led to purposefully put this into practice. I didn't know how, but I asked God to teach me. I invited this man to meet over coffee just for casual conversation. The entire time we met, I kept thinking, *It doesn't matter if I don't like him. I just need to express God's love through my actions and words.*

I started looking for the love of God in him, and I started looking for the power to love from God's love in me. I took my focus off the things I didn't like and put them on the love of God. Over the next few weeks, we met regularly and the more I allowed God's love to be the focus, the less I began to notice the little annoyances that had bothered me. It wasn't long before I didn't even notice them at all.

Now I look back and ask myself, why was this even a conflict? None of the things I thought were problems mattered in the least. The agape love of God bridged the gap between us, and gave birth to philia love as well. Now I like the person I didn't think I could get along with, and I value him as a friend.

That is the power of love in the Christian's life. The world can't do this, for there is no agape love to carry them when their conditional love fails.

By this shall the world know we are in Christ. The people whose lives are in the flesh can't get beyond their differences, but for the people of God, the flesh is not a limitation. The crumbling walls of separation becomes the evidence that something greater than humanity is at work within us.

Love in action overcomes every barrier.

So why is this missing in the church today? It's the age-old battle of the flesh and the Spirit. Consider this explanation from **Romans 8:5-9**

⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those *who live* according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.

⁶ For to be carnally minded *is* death, but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace.

⁷ Because the carnal mind *is* enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.

⁸ So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹ But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if

indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.

If you are in Christ, you are in the Spirit, yet you can still walk according to the flesh. We'll dig some more truths out of the above passage shortly, but first let's add **Galatians 5:24-26** into the mix:

²⁴ And those *who are* Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

²⁵ If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.

²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

This passage helps clarify why some people fail to experience spiritual fruit. Keep in mind that all spiritual fruit is born out of love. Galatians 5 talks about the fruit of the Spirit and it doesn't say 'fruits' but 'fruit'. The fruit of the Spirit is love, and the evidence of the fruit of love is joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, and self-control. Compare these evidences of the fruit of the Spirit to the definition of love given in 1 Corinthians 13. They are one in the same.

So we can see that the Bible says we are in the Spirit if we are in Christ, yet we are also instructed that since we 'live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit'. When we fail to do so, we see the works of the flesh beginning to emerge per verse 26 above. The thought continues into the next chapter in Galatians where we are told that if we see someone overtaken by a fault, we

who are still in the Spirit should reach out and restore that person with a gentle spirit, considering ourselves, for we are no more immune to temptation than the person we are trying to restore.

This chapter goes on to instruct us to bear each other's burdens, for then we will have fulfilled the law of Christ. And what is that law? Faith in His love. We have just come full circle and are back into the command to receive God's love and express it to others.

When we are walking in the Spirit, focused on the love of God and the gift of that love to us, we are walking in the fulfillment of God's commands. When we take our eyes off the love of God, we are distracted by the flesh and many evidences of the flesh begin to emerge. Do you see this in the church today? **1**

Corinthians 3:3

For you are still carnal. For where *there are* envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like *mere* men?

In the flesh, we behave like mere men. There is little difference between the carnal (or fleshly minded) Christian and the world around us. Then the evidence we are in the flesh is divisions, strife, and envy. When the church starts drawing lines of division, it is because the people and leadership are drawing their understanding from the flesh. These are those who say, "Those people are in error so we are excluding them from the church." Then men begin placing each other under labels. It can be denominational lines, leaders we disagree with, doctrines, or anything else that divides.

While the Bible says, “Restore someone with a spirit of gentleness,” those behaving like mere men are casting their brothers and sisters aside, and making pet beliefs and differences in perspectives the litmus test for whether they will acknowledge someone as being in Christ or not. Then the world looks at our internal bickering and says, “I don’t see any evidence of God’s love.”

To be carnally (or fleshly) minded is death. A Christian can have the Spirit of God and still choose to live under the standard of death. Or we can walk in the Spirit and have life and peace. If someone is saying, “Stand against those people,” referring to a body of believers they don’t agree with, is that life and peace? Is beating the war drums of ‘defending the faith’ the evidence of life and peace?

The fleshly mind draws lines of separation that God has not drawn. Ask yourself this. Did God create the lines of denominations? Did God create labels such as Calvinism, Arminianism, or any of the labels we place on ourselves or others for the purpose of dividing into separate camps? If God didn’t create these borders, what is the source?

The carnal mind says, “You are either with me or against me.” But Christ says, “By this shall all men know you are of Me – your love for each other.” The carnal mind says, “You must either adopt ‘our’ views or you are heretics and excluded from our fellowship.” The Spirit says, “A new command I give, that you love one another. Anyone who does not love is not of God.”

You can be in Christ and still miss the call of God. When a person, church, denomination, or organization takes it upon themselves to divide the body, they are not of God. They may love God, but they are not loving God. In other words, they may have received God's love, but instead of expressing that love as God has commanded, they have fallen back into the mere human way of thinking. They are now trying to serve God by human effort. Then what doesn't look good to human eyes is assumed to be a threat, and while they are seeking to protect God, they are actually attacking those God loves.

These fleshly minded Christians are claiming to be defenders of the faith. Then the carnal minded person can believe they are showing God love while persecuting God's people. God Himself states that you cannot love God while hating your brother. This is true even if your brother is wrong. Look at **1 John 4:20-21**

²⁰ If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?

²¹ And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God *must* love his brother also.

If you are defending the faith, does that place you outside of this command? Not at all! If you are jealous for the church, does that give you an exemption for the command to love your brother? No. If you declare someone as a heretic, does that give you the right to persecute them? No. Does God give people

supernatural insights to determine that some are not of Christ and therefore are not a brother, thus giving them the right to persecute? Perhaps we'll let the Apostle James answer this one. **James 4:12**

There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?

There will be people who react very negatively to this message. Calling for unity in the body can cause those who are creating divisions to become defensive – and often aggressive.

When I was an interim pastor at a church, I saw divisions among the members. People were dividing into camps and accusing the other side of evil. One man called someone 'demon possessed' and he used this as his justification to attack 'God's enemy'. As the tension grew, I decided to preach a message on the love of God. I explained many of the things I'm sharing here. One thing I said is, "No Christian has the right to call another Christian demon-possessed." I shared the above passage where the Bible tells us that if we don't love our brother, and we think we are loving God, we are lying to ourselves.

Out of all the messages I've preached over the years, this one had the most negative reactions of them all. Yet the negative reactions only came from those who were trying to justify their hatred. One lady called me on the phone and screamed at me in a fit of rage. Another man said I spewed venom at him from the pulpit. Yet another accused me of saying things I never even thought. These people were so adamant I had

attacked them that I decided to review the recording of the sermon.

Not one thing I was accused of was on the recording. In fact, I thought I was a little soft and the message came across as too passive. I took a step back and asked, “Who is angry and why?” Every person who reacted negatively was also in conflict with others. Not one person got angry who wasn’t already in that hostile mindset. Only those who felt justified in attacking other church members became angry when the scriptures confronted their actions.

How can preaching what biblical love looks like create such a hostile reaction? It’s because the fleshly mind cannot receive the things of God. From the human perspective, opponents must be stamped out. They aren’t viewed as brethren, but as threats. And the human mind thinks God needs us to protect Him. When we think the truth must be protected by human effort, we are no longer walking by faith. Yet when someone is established in the truth, what is not true is no longer a threat.

We merely lay the truth before us, knowing the truth exposes everything around it. The lie is made manifest by the truth. A lie isn’t defeated by studying the lie, talking about the lie, focusing on the lie, and shoving our accusations into the faces of those who believe the lie. The truth does its work without our intervention. When the truth is held up, anything opposed to the truth is revealed as a lie – not because the truth attacks it, but because the lie doesn’t conform to the truth. Error can only stand when it hides the

truth, flees from the truth, or draws attention away from the truth.

Forget the lie and focus on the truth. Then there is no place for error.

If a brother is overtaken in a fault, our command isn't to beat him with the fault, but to restore with a spirit of gentleness. There is a big difference between restoration and condemnation. One reaches down with the hand of love, the other demands for the person to climb out of the pit they have fallen into.

I have never seen a deceived brother turn from an error by someone arguing against the lie. Yet I have witnessed many restorations to the truth. When someone isn't afraid of the error, they can share the truth with gentleness, explore the misconceptions, and answer with more truth. That's when I've seen people walk away with a heart that is searching for answers. Through the gentleness of one who is spiritual, a brother is won over. Once battle lines have been drawn, neither side is looking for answers. Each side is attacking, defending, and counter attacking.

This is not the evidence of spiritual mindedness.

God commanded that we love each other for a reason. He invested His love within us for the purpose of accomplishing His love through us. Perfect love produces God's perfect work. Human effort may be able to build a human religious kingdom, but it can never build anything of eternal value.

You and I cannot please God without trusting in His love. That is not only trusting in His love for us, but also believing God has the power to change others with

the same love we have received. Many are sincerely trying to serve God, but since their efforts are that of mere men, all their labors are in vain.

Your doctrine is not the evidence of God. The evidence you are in the truth is your agape love. You trust in God's agape love, and because His love is working in your heart, it does its supernatural work in the church. Human conflicts crumble and agape unites the church under Christ. Only then will the world know we are His disciples. Everything else is a distraction from that command.

God never commanded you to defend the faith. God never commanded you or the church to destroy error. God never commanded you or the church to force people to conform to a godly standard. God never commanded you to weed out the heretics. God did command you to love. What does that tell you about the focus of you and the church? Can you fulfill God's call without fulfilling the command to agape?

The Only Source of Unity

Many have tried to unify the religions of the world by focusing on our commonality, but this is unity that is dependent upon human effort. There is one common ground we indeed use for finding unity – through Christ. He is the foundation of the church.

Whenever unity is taught, people often ask one of two questions. Are you saying we should throw out Christ and unite with other religions? No. Unity is always found through Christ. When the Bible speaks of unity, it is to first be united with Christ, and as we draw near to Him, we naturally draw near to each other. If you draw toward anything other than Christ, people are scattering and the unity of the Body is no longer possible.

The second question is, what about doctrine. Shouldn't we separate from those who teach differently? The answer is no – unless they are causing division or pointing us to something other than Christ. If you lose sight of the love of God through Christ, you've lost Christianity. This is true even if you are trying to do good. Consider Jesus' words to the church of Ephesus in **Revelation 2:2-5**

² "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars;

³ "and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have

not become weary.

⁴ "Nevertheless I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love.

⁵ "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place-- unless you repent.

The first works comes directly out of the first love. The love of God compels us into the command to love others. This is why our love for the brethren is the evidence we are in the love of Christ. This is also why the Bible says, "By this we know we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren."⁴ Our love is the evidence we are in God's love. Only by turning from the love of God can we fail to love the brethren. And this church was distracted by many works they thought were good, but they forgot the one thing that is foundational to abiding in Christ – agape love. They replaced the love of God with their own works.

The Christians were doing all the doctrinal things they thought were right. They hated evil. They worked hard. They had no tolerance for those who were evil. They exposed false apostles. They even labored in the name of Jesus, yet look at Jesus' own words. Because they lost sight of love, He warned them that He would remove them from His power unless they repented. Repent means a change of mind, focus, or direction. They were pursuing all the church things, but unless

⁴ 1 John 3:14

they returned to His love, all their religion and labor meant nothing.

The same is true for you and your church. If you lose agape, you've lost the heart of God, and nothing you do can please God. Even if you labor in Jesus' name, expose false teachers, avoid sin, and endure with patience, if you don't have love, it means nothing. We are told the same thing in 1 Corinthians 13. If I do good works, sacrifice everything, and even offer my own body as an offering, if I don't have agape, it profits nothing.

Everything must flow from the love of God or it is not of God. The opposite is also true. If someone is focused on Christ, receiving the love of God, and abiding in His love, errors in belief are not reasons to divide. There is no way we can truly be Christ focused and wander away from God. On top of this, if we have a relationship with other believers who have misconceptions, if our relationship is built upon the love of God, we will have the gentleness of spirit to share the truths of God with them and guide them into a more accurate way of thinking.

Consider the ministry of Pricilla and Aquila in Acts 18. They heard a man named Apollos teaching in a synagogue. He loved Christ and was persuading Jews of the truth of the gospel. But he had flaws in his doctrine. After the teaching came to an end, Pricilla and Aquila reached out to him and began teaching him the way of truth more accurately.

They did not call him a heretic, deceiver, or rebuke him publicly as is the common practice of many in the church today. They recognized his love for God, counted

him as a brother, and shared what they understood with him so he could grow into a better understanding. Unity produced the opportunity for discipleship, and Apollos became one of the most important church leaders in the New Testament.

If they had stripped love out of the relationship, it would have become 'our doctrine verses your doctrine'. They both focused on Christ, and this produced the relationship that allowed them to explore the scriptures as one, instead of as opposing doctrines.

Unity comes through the cross. The cross is where the love of God was given to us as acts of God's favor. If God favors us without conditions, shouldn't we extend that same grace to other believers?

The church attains unity as it draws near Christ. As the church matures in Christ and is united together, the body begins to edify itself in love (agape). Let's explore this truth in **Ephesians 4:11-16**

¹¹ And He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers,

¹² for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ,

¹³ till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ;

¹⁴ that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting,

¹⁵ but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head-- Christ--
¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

Notice the purpose of leadership and what the focus of ministry is. The leaders in the church are called to equip the saints for ministry to work as one in the body – the church. This is accomplished by teaching people to focus on the fullness of Christ and draw near to Him alone as our head. When we are drawing into the head, Christ, we can do nothing other than draw near to others who are drawing into Christ. Each person is drawing into the head and by default, we are also drawn together.

People are great at speaking the truth, but lousy at doing so in love. Those who think they are defending the faith will say things like, “My rebuke is showing them tough love.” Not so. Where is the gentleness the Bible commands us to use when reaching out to those who are straying? When we lose sight of agape, we begin to do works in the flesh. We present it as spiritual works, but because we have stepped out of agape, we are just like the church in Revelation 3. We are trying to do all the right things but from the wrong perspective. We are fighting evil in the flesh instead of overcoming with the love of God.

You cannot please God without expressing agape love to your brethren and to the culture around you. Good works without agape equals acts of the flesh.

It is the responsibility of leadership to teach people how to focus on Christ. Once every person is doing their part, the body flourishes and each member finds acceptance while also supplying what others lack.

In our modern church, people divide over differences instead of looking at these as supplying what the body lacks. Those charismatics are gifted by God to share life in the church. Those intellectuals are gifted by God to share insights in the church and equip others with answers that reach the culture around us. Those theologians over there are gifted by God to provide doctrine and keep the body in step with the word. Every person has giftings that benefit all. When all the theologians gather alone, they lack what other members supply. When those gifted in spirited worship gather alone, they lack what the others supply, and others lack what they would have supplied.

Segregation is part of our human nature. People like to gather with those of their race, background, social status, financial status, and other areas within their comfort zone. To see this in action, walk into any place where large numbers of people are forced to assemble – such as a school. Go into a lunch room and witness people segregating themselves. I don't know what the modern social distinctions are, but when I was in high school, rednecks sat at one table, preppies at another, nerds or geeks at another, and then minorities gathered together based on their own race.

No one met them at the door and said, “You must segregate.” Each person chose to segregate themselves. Churches do the same. There are a few mixes of race, but most churches are predominately Black, Hispanic, Asian, White, or other race. Then these groups segregate into Baptist, Pentecostal, Church of God, Church of Christ, or any one of the other thirty-plus thousand denominations.

It’s human nature to segregate, but God calls His church out of human nature and into a spiritual culture where there is no race, economic, social, or other dividing status. As the church lost focus on spiritual life and took its cues from the culture, we’ve adopted methods of thinking that is opposed to Christ. Or perhaps I should say, “We have remained in our old fleshly ways of thinking that are opposed to Christ.”

Part of discipleship is teaching people to leave behind the elementary ways of thinking and move into an eternal way of thinking. People have to mature into unity. Otherwise disunity is the natural digression.

Because the church is ineffective in equipping the saints for ministry and focusing on Christ, each member looks at their gifts as though everyone must possess the same gifts. Then people segregate themselves, or are pushed out of the local church because their gifts and focus aren’t the same as the local sect; therefore, a new perspective is viewed as a threat instead of supplying what other members lack.

Passions are the same way. I’ve seen people who were passionate about the unborn condemn the body because others didn’t share their passion. Those who

have a passion to reach prisoners condemn others for not sharing their passion. People who care for the homeless scold those who don't have this passion.

God does not give us gifts and passions to condemn those who don't possess these. You are gifted by God to fit within the body. He does not call you to transform the hand into the foot or an eye into an ear. Why are we force-feeding our passions on those God has not called into our ministry focus? Why are we rejecting those whom God sends to bring life into the church and forcing them to segregate? Either we are one body or God has not told us the truth.

There was a time when I thought denominational lines were good. I thought separating from others with differences was right. This was a false assumption on my part. When we separate over differences, we stagnate. If we only permit those who fully align with ourselves to remain, we never are challenged to dig deeper, are never challenged with scriptures we have glossed over, we never have our assumptions challenged, and therefore we remain in a stale mindset.

Some of the greatest revelations of truth in my life began when someone challenged my assumptions. Some things I would have never thought to question came into focus by someone with a fresh perspective. Perspectives I never would have considered came to life because someone from a different background shared scriptures in a way I had not considered. At times I discovered new truths; other times I had the opportunity to share my perspective and lead them into

the way more perfectly. They sharpen me and I sharpen them. This is the biblical way.

To shelter ourselves from any perspective but our own stagnated comfort zone is to deprive ourselves of what God has gifted others to share.

It's okay to be wrong. It's okay if someone else is wrong. If you aren't discovering areas where your assumption is wrong, you aren't growing. The moment we determine that all our assumptions are facts is the time we quit growing.

We can see this throughout life. When science decides something is a fact, learning and discovery ceases. The moment someone says their assumed beliefs are unquestionable facts, they are no longer learning or growing. When science believed the earth was flat, they rejected anyone who challenged their ideas. Learning ceased because the focus was on protecting the assumption of fact instead of studying objections to see if there was something to be discovered.

When Galileo challenged the assumption that the earth was the center of the universe, both science and religion fought him. Nothing was learned and all the focus was on protecting the assumption and eliminating the one who challenged the assumption.

Now science states that evolution is a fact and anyone who challenges this assumption is attacked. Many areas of discovery are blockaded because anything that doesn't support the assumption of fact is considered a threat.

There is a reason all scientific fields are called 'scientific theory'. Many facts are present, and assumptions are based on known facts. When a new discovery is found, sometimes it proves flaws in what was once assumed to be true. Then the theory must be rebuilt to incorporate the new discoveries. If a discovery is rejected, advancement stops.

In matters of faith it is the same way. Consider **Romans 11:33**

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable *are* His judgments and His ways past finding out!

You don't have all the answers. You will never have all the answers. Faith calls us into the discovery of God's unsearchable richness. As it is in science, so it is in discovering the richness of God. I build my understanding upon what I learn. After I'm established in what I've discovered, I am called by God to dive below the surface of my understanding into the deeper things of God.

I will discover new truths that will both build my understanding and force me to reevaluate my past assumptions. New discoveries will reveal flaws in my assumptions, and I then have to change my thinking and grow in my understanding. The assumptions that worked when I was less mature will no longer work when I grow out of them.

Yet many Christians build boundaries of doctrine based on assumptions that cannot be challenged. Many churches and organizations build requirements that

forbid questioning the accepted assumptions. Like those who fought against the round earth theory and the rotation of the planets, all growth stops until the limitations on discovery are removed.

It's okay to be wrong. It's okay to change. It's okay to go back and correct misconceptions you have once taught and believed. In fact, if your doctrines are not changing, you aren't growing. How can anyone have an unchanging doctrine if they are discovering new truths from the scriptures? They can't. It's impossible.

When someone presents spiritual concepts we don't agree with, one of two situations have occurred. Either we are not yet where they are, or they are not yet where we are. Instead of causing people to separate, we have the privilege of sharpening each other as we explore the scriptures and evaluate each other's assumptions against the full context of the word of God.

On top of this, what I am discovering may be focused on how God is working in me. He may be preparing me for ministry or building my understanding for what He is about to reveal. Many assumptions die hard, but God works in varying ways to bring us to the point of opening our eyes or working on our unwillingness to believe. My interest may not be where you are now, nor where you are going in the immediate future. When God is shaping our lives, He will stir within us to study what He is maturing in our ways of thinking. How God is maturing you may not fit into where I am growing at this moment in time. So doctrine cannot be forced into the life that is not yet ready to receive it.

Jesus even stated this when He said, “I have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.”⁵ In Hebrews we see the church being told that they were only prepared for the milk of the word and could not yet handle the strong meat of truth.⁶ Anyone who has been maturing in the faith can look back and see this in their own life. Things I couldn’t receive earlier in my faith became treasures later. In the same way, things we share and things others share may be distasteful until we (or they) have reached the right time of maturity. Yet we have the natural temptation to reject anyone who presents things that are outside of our norm.

Don’t allow denominational barriers and man-made boundaries to prevent you from maturing in the faith. Don’t stay in the safe waters because you are afraid God’s revelation will challenge the status quo. Grow. Discover. Accept the fact that assumptions are limited by our limited knowledge. Allow people to challenge assumptions.

Life is lived in discovery of the unsearchable richness of God and His word. What you discover is for the edifying of the body (the church). What others are discovering are also for the edifying of the body. It’s okay when someone challenges your doctrine. It’s either your opportunity to grow, or it’s your opportunity to help the other person grow. God does not call for division, but unity. As each of us grows into the head, Christ, we will discover new insights and grow out of old ways of thinking. This is a good thing.

⁵ John 16:12

⁶ Hebrews 5:12-14

Allow God to equip. Focus on Christ. Then don't allow differences to become barriers, but view these as God providing what the body needs. It is when people are isolated from the body and are missing what others supply that errors take root, people stagnate, and the body is hindered.

The greater error is to abandon God's command to love. People find many ways of justifying disobedience to this command, but it doesn't change the fact that if we are not rooted and grounded in love, we are not serving God. Unity comes through focusing on Christ together, without distractions or barriers.

Dealing with Divisiveness

Divisions have always plagued the church, and the Bible always points to the carnal mind as the cause of these conflicts. People become divisive when they don't get their way. Others stir up divisions when their pet beliefs are challenged. Sometimes it is a desire for authority or power – self-glorification.

The Apostle John was expelled from a church he took part in founding. The book of 3 John describes a church leader who took over the church and cast out any who questioned him. Not only that, but those who met with anyone not of that church were also expelled.

During his last message, the Apostle Paul warned that after he departed, wolves would rise up within the church to draw disciples after themselves. People like to gain power, and then protect their power. People create divisions, and then demand others adhere to their divisiveness.

Every divisive person believes they have a good reason for causing divisions. Just as it was in the Apostle John's day, there are people in our era who demand church members to reject others who don't hold to their doctrines. They use fear tactics like, "Your very soul is at stake," or, "They are after your children." Then any who don't submit are also labeled as the enemy and become part of the rejected ones.

The easiest tactic of divisiveness is to create an enemy for the congregation to fear, and then call others to fight against the enemy. Yet everyone who stands

upon faith cannot abide in fear. Perfect love casts out fear, and the one who fears has not been made perfect in love.⁷ Jesus said to be anxious for nothing.⁸ In Proverbs the Bible says the wicked flee when no one is pursuing, but the righteous are bold as a lion.⁹

The next time someone warns you of the invasion of evil in the church, ask yourself, “Does this encourage me to be bold as a lion?”

Why are the righteous bold? It is because when our trust is in the unstoppable will of God, nothing can threaten us. Even the martyrs of the past faced their persecutors with boldness and joy. Yet now we are told by many modern leaders to hide behind the walls of the church in fear. “Don’t let them in,” they warn.

A few years back a pastor I knew warned his congregation of something he had been learning from a well-known Christian personality. “Satanists are plotting to destroy the church. They are pretending to be believers and getting into teaching positions in the church for the purpose of bringing in destructive heresies.”

People began eyeing new members with suspicion. Is that God’s way? Another ministry run by someone claiming to be an ex-witch warned that figurines and other knickknacks have been cursed by witches for the purpose of smuggling demons into your home. These cursed objects will curse the families of Christians.

⁷ 1 John 4:18

⁸ Luke 12:29, John 14:27, Philippians 4:6

⁹ Proverbs 28:1

Really? The Bible says, “Thus shall be the man be blessed who fears the Lord,” but now Satan can overthrow God’s blessing with a cursed figurine? O you of little faith! When God blesses, no one can reverse it. Let the curses come, they have no power over the one who lives in Christ. Let the Satanists come into the church. God delights in turning the wicked heart into a blessed one. If Christ is being lifted up, it is Satan who fears, not the man or woman of God. Satan wouldn’t want his captives near a church that teaches the grace of God through Christ.

The real threat is those who use divisiveness to persuade the church to take their eyes off Christ and to trust in their own works. The real threat is the one who says to fight against those who don’t hold to their form of doctrine. There are only two times division is permitted in the church. The first one is **Titus 3:10-11**

¹⁰ Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition,

¹¹ knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.

It is those who cause divisions that should be rejected – not those the divisive person is trying to turn you against. Even so, we first try to reconcile them, but if they are divisive after two attempts, move on. Don’t allow this person to draw you into their attitude. They will have many reasonable sounding arguments as to why they are justified in rejecting members of Christ, but according to scripture, they are not serving God, but themselves. This is also affirmed in **Romans 16:17-18**

¹⁷ Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.

¹⁸ For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.

Again, they are not serving Christ, but themselves. Their words are persuasive and they deceive by twisting the word for their own means. Those who are not grounded in the word will be caught up in the divisions. They present many good sounding arguments and deceive many in the church to side with their divisiveness. God has commanded you to avoid them. Even if they warn you of God's judgment against you, have confidence in God's promises and choose life – not condemnation.

These don't hold to the doctrine we have been taught. And what is the foundational doctrine of the Christian life? It begins with the love of God expressed to us through Christ, and the next truth is the love of the brethren. Our doctrine begins with, "By this shall all men know you are My disciples, because of your love (agape) for one another." The foundational doctrine of the Christian life is that we receive God's agape love, and we are supernaturally empowered to love our brethren first, and the people of the world next.

If you don't see the love of God in the message, it isn't the doctrine you received from Christ. If it preaches fear, it is not of God. The quickest way for people to

draw disciples after themselves is to make someone into an enemy, create fear of that enemy, and then stir people to defend themselves from the newly created enemy. Fear and hate are powerful tools of the flesh, and they have no place in the life of the Spirit.

The second reason to divide is found in **1 Corinthians 5:10-12**

¹⁰ Yet *I* certainly *did* not *mean* with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.

¹¹ But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner-- not even to eat with such a person.

¹² For what *have I to do* with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside?

¹³ But those who are outside God judges. Therefore "put away from yourselves the evil person."

In this passage, the Apostle Paul is addressing the fact that the Corinthian church allowed a man to have an affair with his own mother in the church. They tolerated it and turned a blind eye to his open sin. Two things are explained to the church in this passage. It is not the church's place to force a godless culture to live according to a godly standard. Anyone who understands faith knows that it's impossible for the culture to live

godly, so we can expect this behavior outside of the church. Inside the church is another matter. We are called to confront openly sinful lifestyles in the church.

Even though the church was called to exclude fellowship from this person so that others were not drawn into accepting sin, the church is also instructed not to count fellow believers as enemies. Consider **2 Thessalonians 3:14-15**

¹⁴ And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed.

¹⁵ Yet do not count *him* as an enemy, but admonish *him* as a brother.

The purpose of church discipline is to make it clear that openly sinful behavior isn't part of Christianity. Yet even during our admonishment of willful sin, we are instructed not to count that person as an enemy. They are still a brother in Christ and our hope is always reconciliation – first to Christ and then to the body.

In 2 Corinthians we see that the man in the affair was sorry and turned from his sin. The church was then instructed to reach out to him, restore him in love, and encourage him.

Whether a person is stirring up divisions or attempting to bring into the church the acceptance of sin, our goal is always restoration. Restoration first, then if necessary, exclusion for the purpose of revealing the sin isn't compatible with church life. Finally, if the person turns back to Christ, we again reach out with restoration.

These are the Bible's commands when someone has intentionally turned from Christ to follow sin or their own self-serving motives; however, the active role of the church is to create a spirit of unity in everyday life.

Every sin does not need a public rebuke. We all sin when we are walking according to the flesh. The Bible says that anything not of faith is sin. Bringing people into maturity is how we get others out of that mindset. People are naturally selfish and self-serving. People fight in the church because they are trying to fulfill themselves. When two people who are takers cross paths, conflict is going to emerge. This is explained in **James 4:2-8**

² You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask.

³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend *it* on your pleasures.

⁴ Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

⁵ Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously"?

⁶ But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble."

⁷ Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

⁸ Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.

Cleanse *your* hands, *you* sinners; and purify *your* hearts, *you* double-minded.

The Apostle James is straightforward and blunt in this passage, but notice the progression of thought. In the church, people are fighting and warring because they are trying to obtain for selfish reasons. Anyone who has been in church for long enough has witnessed wars among people. One person gets, the other is offended. One person then decides they aren't going to be denied the next time, so they not only try to obtain their own desires, but they also feel the need to fight off their rival.

James then makes a shift in thinking. You shouldn't be fighting to get your way, you should be looking to God as your provider. Then he explains that people ask and don't receive because they aren't trusting in God's plan; they are trying to make life and church about their own fleshly desires.

This person has adopted the world's mindset of gratifying the flesh and making everything about getting status and selfish fulfillment. That's of the world – the lifestyle we have come out of. The world couldn't fulfill you before. The world shouldn't be your pursuit now. Anyone who is now pursuing the world is stepping back into a mindset that is at war with God. Why would you want to go back to that failing system?

At the heart of our wars is pride. "I'm not going to take that. I deserve recognition. I should get that position." Name the 'I'. There can only be one 'I am'.

Either I am in control, or I must submit to the great I AM and trust in His control.

Then we are given the promise. The one who steps out of selfishness and humbles their will to trust in God finds the abundance of grace that isn't available to the one who lives by selfish pride. What's more is that the one serving self is wide open to temptation, but the one who submits to God is drawn near to Him and by default, Satan must flee. Satan can beckon you to join him in the world and fleshly ways of thinking, but Satan cannot go into God's presence. Satan can manipulate and control the one whose mind is set on the flesh, but he has no power against the one walking in the Spirit.

This is also affirmed in **1 Corinthians 3:3**

For you are still carnal. For where *there are* envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like *mere* men?

We looked at this earlier. Notice that strife, envy, and divisions are the evidences that we are not spiritually minded. The fleshly, or carnal, mind is at war with God, so naturally it is going to act contrary to unity in the Body of Christ, the church.

This takes us back to the teaching we saw in Ephesians 4. God has appointed leaders within the church to teach members how to live with a Christ focus. We are equipped for ministry as we learn to draw into the head, Christ. If a teacher is failing in this, they are failing in their calling. Any teacher who points to anything other than trusting and drawing near to Christ

is teaching from the flesh. A leader who calls for division is teaching from the flesh.

It is the responsibility of teachers to equip the saints for ministry. We are all saints if we are in Christ. We are equipped by learning how to draw from Christ and not our selfish desires. We are equipped by drawing into Christ and not to a person or selfish hope. We are equipped when we learn to be spiritually minded and step out of the flesh. A person who learns to walk in the Spirit is equipped. A person who lives for the fleshly mind can never be equipped.

We are equipped by maturing into Christ. We overcome selfishness by maturing into Christ. We overcome divisiveness from others by staying focused on Christ and overcoming the evil done through the good we are receiving. Agape overcomes hatred, unless we are persuaded to abandon the love of God and take upon ourselves what God has reserved for Himself.

God is His own defender. God's word will always stand. This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith in Him. All of these come from His power and not setting ourselves up as the authority over the church or the thoughts and doctrines of others.

Overcoming divisiveness comes through receiving God's love, abiding in it, and drawing near to others through agape as we draw near to Christ.

One Church

Love and unity in the body is the most repeated command in the scriptures. Listening to the focus of most sermons and calls to actions in the church, you'd almost think unity is absent in the Bible. Why do you suppose the Bible spends so much time reiterating these adjoining principles? Could it be that this is the most important thing to God?

According to the Bible, unity among the body is essential for walking worthy of our calling in Christ. Look now at **Ephesians 4:1-13**

¹ I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called,

² with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love,

³ endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

⁴ *There is* one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling;

⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism;

⁶ one God and Father of all, who *is* above all, and through all, and in you all.

⁷ But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

According to this command to the church, we are to use lowliness, gentleness, and patience (which are all given to us through the Spirit) as the foundations of our

endeavor to keep unity. To endeavor means to make haste and exert one's self to accomplish something. This means you are to exert yourself and use the gifts of God to maintain the unity of the church. It is an effort. Disunity comes without any effort on our part. Some hasten to create disunity against those who don't share their opinions, but the Bible commands the opposite.

If you are not working to maintain unity, you aren't in obedience to God. This means when signs of trouble begin, we should hasten to resolve the issues to maintain unity. We don't wait until full out war begins. Nor do we incite others to divide with us against those we have a disagreement with. We do everything within our God-given power to keep people focused on being one in Christ. This is reiterated to us in **1 Corinthians 1:10**

Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and *that* there be no divisions among you, but *that* you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

Gentleness goes a long way in unity. A lowly mind approaches someone with a humble attitude. Patience with others keeps our reactions in check.

There will be times when people will have nothing to do with unity. They will either be so selfish they demand their own ways and stir up strife to get it, or they are so self-important that they will rail against anyone who doesn't subscribe to their beliefs. Some people make a living off so-called discernment

ministries and claims of being the defender of the faith. Many of these will have nothing to do with peace. This is why the Bible tells us that if someone remains divisive after the first or second admonition, separate from them – they are self-condemned.

They claim to be defending the faith, but God says they are self-condemning. Why? Because we are one body, one faith, one church, one baptism. There is no denominational boundary in God's kingdom. Those who draw lines against God's people are condemning themselves and we are commanded to withdraw from these people.

This is coming from someone who once would have sided with the apologists. Like many today, I thought I was doing God a service, but I was creating disunity, suspicion, and drawing lines of division. Innocent misconceptions in doctrine were viewed as an intentional deception. The truth is, when someone has flawed beliefs, they are just like you. They are trying to understand the scriptures, but are limited by their own understanding, background, and other influences. Yet as they (and we) grow, God opens their eyes to new truths and the old misconceptions begin to fall away.

The command of God is not to reject those who are struggling, but to bear with them, strive for unity, and through patience, humility, and gentleness with love, guide them into a better understanding. And don't discount the possibility that you may not have perfect understanding.

The command is that we all be of one mind and speak the same things. This means we focus on the

certain truths of our faith, and work outward from there. Explore who Christ is, what He has given, the love God has provided, the truth that all things are from God and not us, and then begin exploring the richness of God's word and this life we have been given.

This command does not mean we have to agree on everything. This is not possible. Rarely do we even find two people at the same point of spiritual maturity, so it's not possible to see everything from the same perspective. Yet if we focus on the truth that we have one Lord, we have the same faith, the same Spirit, and we are all members of the same body, then we have common ground by which we can have unity.

Once unity is established and relationships begin to mature with one another, discussing varying viewpoints and perspectives can be an enriching experience. When there is a non-threatening avenue for dialog, it can be enjoyable to discuss differences as you explore the scriptures and dig out truths. When the goal isn't to force someone into your mold, and you are not threatened when someone presents a different perspective, even disagreements on doctrines can build friendship and enhance fellowship. How boring a conversation would be if all we could say is, "I agree."

When my own attitude changed, I began to discover friendships with people I once thought were threats to what I considered to be the correct doctrine. Once the barriers were removed, I discovered 'those people' are not much different than myself. They loved God, loved the scriptures, and were trying to learn and grow just as I was.

I had allowed myself to be influenced into fearing others and drawing lines to keep them out of our 'right way of thinking', and once that manmade barrier was removed, I found both sides have a lot to offer. Where I am unclear, they have much insight. Where they are unclear on passages, I have insight. As long as the gifts and insights are divided, the church cannot be edified by what each member supplies. And God didn't give my huddle group all the answers. He spread His revelations and gifts across the denominational lines, and disunity makes it impossible for the body of Christ to thrive as it should.

Are there false teachers and enemies of God that arise in the church? Certainly. However, attacking other churches, denominations, and creating divisions in the church is not the answer. It only shows the world that we are hypocrites. We are claiming to be loving people, yet there are more wars in the church than in the culture. The church has created more persecution of its own than the world has.

When someone is in error, beating them over the head with the error doesn't change anyone's heart. If anything, a hostile reaction causes people to entrench themselves and feel like martyrs. The error cannot stand before the truth. When the truth exposes the lie, those holding to the lie become aggressors. Let the works of the flesh prove the lie to be of the flesh. Never can the works of the flesh affirm the truth. Contentions, hatred, outbursts of wrath, and dissensions are works of the flesh. When we try to defend God through the flesh, it never works.

As I stated before, God does not need us to defend Him. He will expose the lie. We seek to reveal the truth. Then let the lie implode upon itself. Consider Matthew 15:13-14

¹³ But He answered and said, "Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.

¹⁴ "Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch."

False religion cannot stand. God may allow it to test the hearts of people, but sooner or later, God will uproot it. Never do we see the apostles attacking churches. People with false teachings came into the church and were confronted with the truth. They did not make their ministries about exposing lies. Lies are exposed by default when the truth is understood. On the rare occasion when a false teacher is addressed specifically in the Bible, the apostles pointed to the correct doctrine and moved on. They didn't dwell on the lie.

God never called the church into civil war. He commands unity. He commands love among each barrier regardless of the lines we find in our way. God commands both you and I to make haste and endeavor to keep the unity and the bond of peace in the body.

We are one body – regardless of what our church and denominations may teach. Many acknowledge this as true, but then justify remaining behind divisions. Few

are the people who obey God's command to endeavor to keep the body functioning as one.

Will you and I be among the few?

Unity Through the Word

Arguing and creating division over non-essentials are foolish distractions from the gospel. When people get a little knowledge, it should draw them toward a deeper fellowship instead of puffing them up against one another. Add to that, none of us have perfect knowledge. We get small glimpses of divine truth at a time, and then we create assumptions around those truths. Sometimes these are true. Sometimes they are misconceptions. Sometimes they are partially true and will be sharpened during later revelations of God's truth.

People begin arguing about what they assume and create divisions based on non-essentials of the gospel. The average Christian will never grow beyond the basics. They get caught up in surface Christianity, and because they don't realize how much there is to discover, they never seek beyond what is taught from the shallow perspective. Many even fear going deeper in the word. Or as a man once explained to me, "If something doesn't come from the association, I can't trust it."

How sad it is to limit what God has planned into your life because you trust only in what is filtered through people you consider to be experts, and you never learn to trust in the Spirit's revelation to you. If you are in Christ, the Spirit is in you, and you have the power to discover what God has given for you to find. Consider the words of Jesus in **John 16:13-15**

¹³ "However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own *authority*, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come.

¹⁴ "He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare *it* to you.

¹⁵ "All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare *it* to you.

I've heard it taught that this promise is only to Jesus' apostles, but this is not so. The Apostle John taught the church, those he called little children of the faith, that anyone who claims to be anointed over you is a deceiver. He then goes on to explain the anointing this way: **1 John 2:27**

But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.

If you are in Christ, you are anointed. He is the head, the anointed one, and anyone who is part of His body is also anointed. There is not a special class of Christian. God did not select a specific denomination, church, or person to make into a head over His body. He alone is that head. He is the head, and in Him, we have the mind of Christ. The Christian life should be the

continual discovery of what is being revealed through our mind in the Spirit. The Apostle Paul stated it well when He said, “Anyone who thinks he knows anything, knows nothing yet that he ought to know.”¹⁰

We underestimate two things in the church. We underestimate the Spirit’s power to reveal truth to us without being dependent upon commentaries, teachers, churches, or pastors. Since people don’t believe in the revelation of truth, they don’t study with the expectation of God’s revelation. Those who don’t believe in the depth of God’s revelation, or view someone or organization as authoritative over us, will be divisive against those who step outside of those boundaries. Then the person discovering deeper things of God will be viewed as a challenge to a leader’s exclusive claim to authority, or a denominational boundary that deeper truths cross.

God is always calling you to discover truth. When I read the word, I don’t hope God will reveal something to me. I know He will reveal truth to me. I open the Bible with full expectation, and God delights in revealing things from the word. In the past, I made myself study and got little out of it. Now I eagerly study because I know there are treasures that *will* be discovered today.

The second thing people underestimate is their limited understanding. Once we think we know something, it’s far too easy to think we now have all the answers. Then people begin arguing over what they think they know, and are unwilling to be challenged or consider what someone else is also discovering.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 8:2

Two people with limited human understanding begin arguing against each other. Both have faint glimpses into the truth of the scriptures on a topic, then they build assumptions based on a small nugget of truth, and pride steps in and causes them to assume their doctrine is flawless. The Bible warns that knowledge puffs up, or makes us proud, but love edifies.

Because we are easily caught up into believing we are right, we tend to defend our assumptions while defeating that of others. If we are truly growing deeper in the truth, many of the things we once felt we had to prove will be abandoned when God reveals deeper insights. And He will – unless we stop seeking and growing.

This means most theological arguments are two ignorant people fighting over assumptions based on a little truth and a lot of pride and ignorance. Most divisions are caused by people inflating non-essential doctrines into essential ones. But it doesn't have to be this way.

Let's consider the main essential truths that the Bible leaves no room for doubt on. Jesus is the only provision for sin. We are saved by grace through faith. It is nothing we can do or have done, it is all God's grace. We love God because He first loved us and poured His agape love into our hearts. We are now commanded to take the love God poured into us, and unite with fellow believers by loving (agape) our brother and striving for the unity of the body of Christ – the church.

Faith, hope, and love. These are the essentials of the Christian life, and the greatest of these is love. (See 1 Corinthians 13:13).

If we face disagreements with these three as our foundation, there can be nothing but unity. Let's consider two scenarios. "Let me tell you where you are wrong," one person said to another in a recent discussion. How do you think this conversation went after this? After being told he was wrong, one person prepared to defend himself. One believed he was a defender of the faith by attacking the error, the other was defending his faith against attack. Before long, he was trying to defend the faith from the other person's error and the argument quickly became heated.

What is the focus of this argument that was soon to become two angry Christians disputing with each other? My doctrine is better than your doctrine. Where does faith, hope, and love find its way into their relationship? It won't. The only focus will be on winning the argument.

There is nothing wrong with discussing differences. In fact, it can make for great fellowship. When we are first focusing on what unites us, we can then approach differences as an exploration of truth instead of a battle for truth.

I have a dear brother in Christ that comes from a completely different background than I. Many of his beliefs are over the top, or at least they seemed to be before getting to know him. The first goal in our relationship is on what unites us. He has the agape love of God in him, and I have it in me. Family members may

have conflicts, but families don't reject each other over petty disagreements – at least they shouldn't. He is my brother, so I must approach our differences with this in mind. And our Father has commanded us to strive for unity first, and then we are free to operate within that loving relationship.

He sees certain scriptures from a perspective I don't understand. Yet because we have a solid relationship based on a mutual hope, faith, and love, we can explore our differences in friendship. Sometimes we don't come to an agreement, but we are both edified by discussing the scripture from differing perspectives. It would be a boring conversation if we just agreed on everything. It would be a conflict if we had to prove each other wrong. It's great fellowship to dig into the scriptures and say, "What about this passage. Here is what I see. This is how this scripture speaks to me and why I view things from my perspective."

Do you see the difference? In the past, I would have felt the need to disprove him. The teachers he likes were heretics, and I felt I was defending God by disproving him, his perspective, and the teachers he values. He probably would have felt animosity toward those things in me. But since our brotherhood of unity is intentional, everything else falls into the correct perspective.

The wrong perspective is to put conditions on unity. Demanding someone abandon their beliefs and conform to mine before we'll accept unity is fleshly mindedness. Christians who disagree with other Christians are labeling opposing viewpoints as evil, even

calling people who hold these views as Satanists. The goal is that if we can label someone as God's enemy, then we are fighting for God. What arrogance it is to think I can fight to defend God. In reality, I am displeasing God by calling my brother a worker of Satan. And why are we fighting? Because my limited understanding is in conflict with his limited understanding.

A Christian does not have the right to declare war on another Christian. Nor do they have the right to declare war on someone they have labeled as a Satanist. According to Jesus, we are commanded to love our brothers. Anyone who expresses hatred to his brother and claims to be serving God is called a liar. (See 1 John 4:20) In the same way, Jesus also commanded us to love our enemies. Regardless of whether we label someone as a brother or a Satanist, we can't escape God's command to love – agape.

In unity, we abide under God's anointing. Consider

Psalm 133:1-3

¹ Behold, how good and how pleasant *it is* For brethren to dwell together in unity!

² *It is* like the precious oil upon the head, Running down on the beard, The beard of Aaron, Running down on the edge of his garments.

³ *It is* like the dew of Hermon, Descending upon the mountains of Zion; For there the LORD commanded the blessing-- Life forevermore.

Christ is the anointed one, in fact, that's what Christ means – the anointed. Any who are under the

head of the church, Christ, are under the anointing. You are anointed in Christ. If you are under the unity, you are drawing near to Christ and into the promise of blessings and life. Yet what happens if we declare that we won't have unity with those we disagree with?

The promise of life and God's blessing is still present, but when we refuse to draw near, we don't experience what is ours by promise. You can't draw near to Christ on your own terms. You can't say, "I will draw near, but I'm not going to be partakers with that group [or person] I disagree with." It is not they who are prevented from drawing near to Him. It is you who refuse to draw near.

When the prodigal son returned in Luke 15, the Father celebrated his life. The son did nothing to get his life right – except draw near. During the celebration, the son who never did wrong refused to participate. The father invited him in, but he pointed out every flaw in his brother's life and refused to participate. While he stood aloof, the celebration went on. The only one who didn't enjoy the fellowship was the one who chose to divide from the group. The celebration went on without him. Take Jesus' words to heart from John 17:22-23

²² "And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one:

²³ "I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.

God loves you just as He loves Christ. God loves those you disagree with just as He loves Christ. People who have wronged you, opposed you, spoken against you, or hold doctrines you are opposed to are still under the same love as you. If you are focused on the faults of others, you are missing the love of God. If you hold on to wrongs, you are missing out on the fullness of God's love that is rightfully yours. If you stand outside the celebration of Christ and say, "I'll have no part with that person," the celebration goes on. It is your place at the table that remains empty.

Your doctrine does not make you perfect. Your misconceptions don't make you imperfect. You are made perfect because you are in Christ. The group you are rejecting is made perfect in Christ – even if they believe something incorrectly. Incorrect believing does prevent us from experiencing everything God has for us – just as unbelief does. But don't forget it is God's Spirit who guides us into all truth.

If you are walking in obedience in Christ, even if you are wrong, God can guide you into a better understanding. The Christian journey is a lifetime of discovering God through His word. You are wrong in more areas than you are right, but God is not hindered by your misconceptions. Disbelief is the only thing that prevents our growth. This isn't God's limitation. Disbelief limits us from receiving what God has given.

If you disbelieve God's command for unity, and disbelieve in the promise of being blessed through unity, it isn't the people you are rejecting that are missing out – it's you. If the Bible puts so much emphasis

on love and unity within the church, can we be in His will if we shun these commands? Will defending God exempt you from these commands? Can you live in obedience while rejecting your brothers and sisters in Christ?

The answer is, “No.” You cannot walk with God while excluding others. You can’t abide in the circle of fellowship with God while closing the circle to others. You will end up outside, listening to the people rejoicing with God, and comforting other defenders of the faith who are also denying themselves of fellowship.

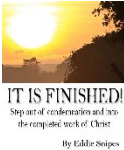
I challenge you to read through the entire New Testament. Write down every instance where you are commanded to love, accept, and unite. Then note every time God instructs you to defend the faith or reject anyone in the church. Study those scriptures and draw your own conclusions.

May God draw your heart into the circle of fellowship and reveal the love given to you and those you once counted as enemies. **John 13:35**

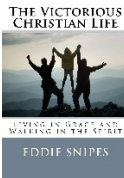
By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.

Are you a disciple?

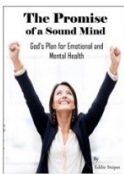
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