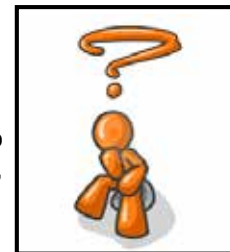


What About... Political Unity In the Church

By Dave DeWitt



Steve Ulmer, a former classmate of mine (Dallas Seminary class of 1972) is one of the good guys trying to deal with this issue. But his experience seems to be different than mine. He recently wrote a paper titled, "Working At Unity In A Time of Political Strife." Here is some of what he wrote:

Even though I said this to myself many times before, that we are in a cultural civil war, I am hearing that more and more lately. ...Christians find themselves experiencing some estrangement from one another even though they attend the same church. Families are split along ideological lines too. Sometimes in our prayers we are actually lecturing others who are present in the same meeting rather than just talking to God... I believe that we should strive to pray for what is on our Lord's heart first of all. That's why I am trying to focus on revival and unity in the Church first of all. [In the context of his paper, by the word "church" he means the local church.]

As I think about the Christian groups I am a part of, they already have political unity. I can remember several times during the presidential campaign where someone in the Brethren Assembly I attend referred to President Trump as "our president." I recall thinking, "Really? The church has a president!?" I'm not sure if "our" referred to our assembly or Christians in general. Nonetheless, the assumption was one of political unity. In the Christian groups I am a part of, there are basically two different views about President Trump:

- (1) Those who like him and like what he does and
- (2) Those who don't like him and like what he does.

There are, of course, those who do not like him and do not like what he does, but not so much in conservative Christian circles. However, if you get beyond President Trump, there is general political unity. For example, everybody in the American Christian groups, I am a part of, believes in pro-life, the traditional family, free speech, the right to bear arms, respecting the American flag, and following the Constitution. They also believe that promoting the acceptance of LGBTQ sexuality, abortion, anti-police rioting, antisemitism, atheistic evolution, and progressivism in the public schools are wrong. It seems that if the church is defined as Bible-believing (relatively mature) Christians, whether they gather together or not, there is already political unity, pretty much.

I agree with Steve Ulmer that America is "in a cultural civil war." But what is interesting is that Ulmer sees this civil war going on in the church, and that is his "focus." I have some observations about that:

Observation #1 The church is a body not an assembly.

As Ryrie points out [Study Bible comment on John 17:21], "All believers belong to the one Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13) and to the same household of God (Eph. 2:19)." If you define the church as believers (Ephesians 5:30; Colossians 1:24), and a church gathering as *our own assembling together* (Hebrews 10:25), then I find that there is already political unity in the church (again, for the most part, and if you leave the personality of President Trump out of it). What my classmate Steve Ulmer is working for is already there.

But if the assembly defines the church, then political unity is as impossible as it is everywhere else. In that case, the church assembly is no longer our own assembling together. If the assembly is not just something the church does, but the very definition of the church itself, then rather than God

determining who is part of the church, the local assembly officials (pastors, deacons, elders, etc.) determine who is part of the church (with membership or something). In that case, the church must be careful not to offend those who are part of that assembly who believe we should tolerate or not tolerate: the LGBTQ lifestyle, open families, feminism, evolution, abortion, and the progressive agenda.

Observation #2 Political unity is not a biblical objective for the church.

National, state, and local politics are about the situation on this earth. Of course, we should be mindful of the earth and take care of it as Israel was to take care of Babylon, while they were in exile there (Jeremiah 29:5, 28). I take care of my car because I need to drive it, but not because the future of my children and grandchildren depends on it. Peter described the church as *those who reside as aliens and strangers...* (1 Peter 1:1; 2:11).

Peter encouraged believers toward moral purity, not political unity. I can recall several times going to another country, like Russia or Hungary, and asking a friend what is going on in their country. Sometimes they mentioned an upcoming election and talked about the candidates. Well, I listened, but I must admit that I was not very interested. Why? Because I was an alien and stranger, not a citizen. I am just there for a little while and then I am going home. That seems to be the attitude of the apostles toward the earth and its political issues. It is the church, the body of Christ, where *you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household* (Ephesians 2:19).

Observation #3 Unity is based on being separated from the world and conformed to the truth, not taking sides in political issues.

John 17:17, *Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.*

With interpretive comments: *Sanctify* [set apart] *them* [the apostles] *in the truth* [the way things actually are]; *Your word* [revealed in the Bible] *is truth* [the way things actually are].

Unity in the church does not come from politics, which always functions using tolerance, compromise, and negotiations. In His "High Priestly" prayer the night before His crucifixion, Jesus asked God the Father to set the apostles apart from the world by the truth, the way things actually are. And the way things actually are is described in the Word of God.

Observation #4 Unity is found in God, not a political system.

John 17:20-21, *I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.*

With interpretive comments: *I do not ask on behalf of these [the apostles] alone, but for those also [the church, including the body of Christ today] who believe in Me through their word that they [the apostles and the church] may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they [the church, including the body of Christ today] also may be in Us, so that the world [the unbelievers] may believe [have an understanding of the truth] that You sent Me.*

The perfect example of **unity** is the relationship between God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son. We, the believers, are called into their unity (1 John 1:3). Morality is defined by their unity. Maturity is being conformed to their unity. And it is their unity, expressed by our unity, which is a testimony to the world, that Jesus is the Son of God.

Observation #5. Unity involves having the same understanding of theological details, not political details.

Ephesians 4:4-6, *There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.*

With interpretive comments: *There is one body [the church, the body of Christ] and one [Holy] Spirit, just as also you were called [chosen in eternity past] in one hope [desired expectation] of your calling [selection from eternity past]; one Lord [Jesus], one faith [understanding of the truth], one baptism [emersion into the church by the Holy Spirit], one God and Father of all who is [sovereign] over all and through all and in all.*

Unity in the church includes unity in theology but not politics. I remember hearing a speaker talking about a small local church that folded up, and its people dispersed, in a town nearby. He said it was because they talked about something other than the gospel. His point was we should only talk about the gospel, anything else can be divisive. But Paul extends our unity to one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father. That extends the discussion way beyond the gospel.

Observation #6 Unity in the church comes through discussion.

Ephesians 4:13-15, *until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ.*

With interpretive comments: *until we all attain to the unity [standing for the same thing morally and theologically], of the faith [understanding of the truth], and of the knowledge [information from Scripture] of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be [morally and theologically] children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine [teaching that adds to or takes away from the Bible], by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking [discussing with one another] the truth [the way things actually are] in love [giving expecting nothing in return], we are to grow up [mature] in all aspects into Him who is the head [of the church], even Christ.*

Unity comes through maturity, which includes discussing theology. Maturity comes through theological discernment, so believers are not carried about by every wind of doctrine. Discernment comes through discussion, *speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ.*

When a pastor or other speaker delivers a message in an auditorium meeting, most people could not tell you what he said by the time they reach their car in the parking lot. From over 50 years of teaching and discipling men, I can tell you people learn when they are part of the discussion, much more than when they are just listening.

People ask, "But don't we have to separate from bad doctrine?" If "bad" means they are adding to or taking away from the Bible, then, yes we need to separate from those people because they are not setting themselves apart for the truth (John 17:17; Revelation 22:18-19). If "bad" means I don't agree with their interpretation or application of the Bible, then no, separation is not called for.

People ask, "Don't such discussions lead to church splits?" Maybe, but that's not so bad if it allows each group to pursue truth and do ministry, without condemning some other group who believes the Bible.

Conclusion

My former classmate, Steve Ulmer, and possibly many other pastors, are concerned about political disunity in their local churches. Unity in the church, the body of all believers in Jesus Christ, is not about politics. **Real church unity is about being drawn into and modeling the oneness that exists between God the Father and God the Son.** This can only be done by believers being set apart from the world by conformity to the Scripture (John 17:17).

But how do we actually do that? Preachers speaking in an auditorium (be it large or small) have limited communication if people are not allowed to interact with the message. The goal is that we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming. And the way to do that is not by limiting the discussion but by speaking the truth in love. It is by speaking to one another that we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ.