The Symphony of Unity

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I remember an incident that happened to my father when I was a young boy which has stayed with me. My dad was a new pastor in a mainline denominational church. On a particular Sunday, he noticed that the path up to where the choir stood was being obstructed on one side by the organ, making it an uncomfortable squeeze to get past. My dad immediately took the initiative and shifted the organ about 30 cm to open up the pathway a bit. Shortly thereafter, just before the service started, he was called to one side by the choir master, who gave my dad a humiliating berating, rebuking him firmly with, 'How dare you move that organ! Do you know how long that organ has been standing there?! Who gave you permission to move it? Who do you think you are?!'

I only heard the whole story when I found my dad weeping in the car after the service. My dad had acted with the best intentions, but the choir master had reacted in a carnal way. He'd been arrogant, rude and shown a complete disregard for spiritual authority, yet do you know what my dad did? He continued faithfully doing what he had always done – loving God and His church. Why would he do that?

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My dad understood that there is something much bigger at stake here. It has to do with the very nature of the kingdom and what God has called us to demonstrate to the world. It is the harmony, the heavenly love, the unity that is within the very Godhead itself. Through our harmony, the church has been called to display the Godhead, dispel the darkness and dispense the kingdom of God.

What Hinders Harmony?

The trouble is, unity doesn't just happen, and when it happens, it doesn't just remain. It is not only in mainline denominational churches where these kinds of things happen. There will be occasions for each of us, whichever church we are in, when our best intentions are misunderstood or when we get over-looked in our roles of service. We will be accused of things (rightly or wrongly) which will leave a sting. As the church grows, we may not receive as much attention from leaders or friends as we used to enjoy. It may be something as small as not getting invited to a birthday party. The truth is, one of the biggest enemies to the Church's unity is the carnality that still lingers in our hearts.

When the Church is united, it is like a God-orchestrated musical masterpiece. It is quite surreal. It speaks of another world – a world of total harmony, where all are together in one place. 'Greek, Jew, slave and free'. Man, woman and child – even angelic hosts! All are united in a display of incredible oneness of heart and mind. While it is difficult to describe how amazing it is, you intuitively know when it is not all there. It is incredible how our ears are tuned to hear imperfections – in a musical piece, we can hear when something is off-beat, a note is out or a key is off. It is exactly the same in God's kingdom.

This is an urgent desire in God's heart: 'I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.' (1 Cor. 1:10)

How to Tune In to Unity

The burning question for us then is how? How can we achieve such unity? As we look to the Scriptures, we notice a pattern in the way God works and the kind of response required from His people:

1. Confessing Christ as Lord

By a sovereign work of His Spirit, God brings us into fellowship, love and unity with Himself, and with others! The Holy Spirit does what is only possible for God to do when we come under Christ's

lordship – He brings a supernatural unity of thoughts and opinions. We see an example of this early on in the story of the Church in Acts, 'All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.' (Acts 4:32)

They no longer counted their lives as the most important, but rather they saw higher value in the lives of others. There was an overflowing of generosity and a giving of themselves as well as their possessions.

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It comes as somewhat of a relief that the heavenly harmony we are aiming for is empowered by the orchestral finesse of the Holy Spirit. The thought of achieving this kind of unity by human ingenuity would be hugely daunting! So we find that as each individual comes under the power of the Holy Spirit, there is a wonderful knitting of hearts that happens at a deep level.

But if you have been a part of a church for any length of time, you will know there is definitely more to the story!

2. A Continuous Commitment to Conforming to Christ's Image

There are so many things which attempt to come between us and cause divisions in our church, whether they be: conflicting opinions, differences over style or culture, frictions caused by offence, or even (as in the Corinthian church) different camps based on affinity to certain teachers or teaching styles. Ultimately, though, the Scriptures often cut through these superficial reasons for division and take aim at the underlying root – carnality. In fact, Paul chalks the divisions in Corinth up to a lack of spiritual maturity (1 Cor 3:2).

> First comes unity with Christ, then comes the walking out of His enabling grace in the very practical aspects of our church life.

Once we have been reconciled with God and brought into His family, there begins the process of transformation into the image of Christ. The implication for our harmony as a Church is described in the following way,

‘Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.’ (Phil 2:1-4)

We see the process here. First comes unity with Christ, then comes the walking out of this enabling grace in the very practical aspects of our church life. It says elsewhere in Scripture, ‘But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.’ (1 John 1:7)

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Our relationships are guaranteed to bring out the worst in us, but this has a good purpose – it enables us to bring the carnality that has been exposed by our offence to Jesus for renewal. In this way, we become more like Him. It should be noted that this promise comes with a big “if”! It is only if we choose to bring our hearts into the beams of Christ’s light that we will transformed and enjoy harmony with each other.

It could be that the reason you don’t feel connected to your church is that you got stuck in this vital process of surrender. What is certain is that if you don’t own your sinfulness, by shifting the blame and pointing at others or choosing to focus on the superficial issues dividing you, the darkness will not be dispelled. It is only the genuine surrender of a contrite heart that dispels the darkness of the chaos of an unsurrendered heart. When we live like this, we are able to push through the ‘organ-moving moments’ and come through stronger and more united than before.

3. Don’t Be Leader Groupies

The last point to mention here is the way in which we relate to leaders. As with the Corinthian church, it is very easy (and common) to relate to leaders or Bible teachers in a carnal way, which results in a church that divides into schisms. The church in Corinth had been divided into fan clubs (those who had a strong affinity with certain Bible teachers). One can only imagine the appeal that certain of these men had. There was Apollos, who was a towering intellect. There was Peter, who had walked with Christ for 3 years!

Is it not much the same in our churches today when one says, ‘I follow John Piper’, another says,

‘I follow Paul Washer’ and another, ‘I follow Andrew Selley’? The root is the same. There is a root of pride which seeks to derive a sense of validation or distinction by affiliating oneself with a certain teacher. What I mean is, if, for example, I identify with the camp which follows the intelligent-sounding, well-grounded, thoroughly Word-based teacher, it says volumes about the kind of person I am!

> ‘So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas.. and you are Christ’s’

Paul concludes this matter with the following words, ‘So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future — all are yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.’ (1 Cor. 3:21 – 23).

And this gets right at the heart of the matter. It is the voice of the Spirit for which we are listening. Our boast is Christ. Our treasure is Christ. Everything belongs to Him and He belongs to us and we belong to Him. The goal is unity with Christ and unity with His body. Where there is heavenly harmony, there is the presence of God, anointing, authority, power. And so let us seek with all our hearts to stay connected to Christ and remain committed to the process of conforming to His image. As we surrender to the Spirit, we allow God to add our unique note to the melodious sound of the heavenly orchestra on earth, and we put God’s glory on display for all the world to see.