



CHAPTER TWO:

I Will Be a Unifying Church Member

"I Am a Church Member", by Thom Rainer

INTRODUCTION

During World War II, Hitler commanded all religious groups to unite so that he could control them. Among the Brethren assemblies, half complied and half refused. Those who went along with the order had a much easier time. Those who did not faced harsh persecution. In almost every family of those who resisted, someone died in a concentration camp.

When the war was over, feelings of bitterness ran deep between the groups and there was much tension. Finally they decided that the situation had to be healed. Leaders from each group met at a quiet retreat. For several days, each person spent time in prayer, examining his own heart in the light of Christ's commands. Then they came together. Francis Schaeffer, who told of the incident, asked a friend who was there, "What did you do then?" "We were just one," he replied. As they confessed their hostility and bitterness to God and yielded to His control, the Holy Spirit created a spirit of unity among them. Love filled their hearts and dissolved their hatred.

When love prevails among believers, especially in times of strong disagreement, it presents to the world an indisputable mark of a true follower of Jesus Christ (Our Daily Bread, October 4, 1992).



Can you describe a time when you were in church that was not unified? What about a time when you were in a church that was unified?

LESSON SUMMARY

In this session, we will see that Scripture emphasizes that church members have a responsibility to create and maintain unity within the church. We will discuss the various ways to create and maintain unity as well as concerns that threaten unity within the church. Ultimately, unity in the church will impact the culture around us. Rainer wrote:

“God desires for Christians to get along. In fact, He is emphatic about it. Jesus was clear when He said: ‘By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another’ (John 13:35). Did you get that? The world will know if we are Christians or not by the way we who are believers act toward one another.”

1. Unity Is Not Optional In The Church

Most of us have been involved in churches where, at some point in time, unity was not present. It may have been during a church split or a business meeting but we have seen fellow believers act like...well, let's just say they weren't acting like Jesus! This breaks the very heart of God because His church should be characterized by love and unity.

One of the greatest pictures of unity in the church can be found in the book of Ephesians. Consider Paul's words in **Ephesians 1:15-16**:

***15** For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, **16** I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers...*

Churches can be known for many things but we see in this passage that the church in Ephesus was characterized by love and unity. In fact, Paul wrote that their "faith in the Lord Jesus" and their "love for all the saints" was being talked about all over. The love and unity in the church was so extraordinary that people could not help but talk about it!



What is our church known for in our community? What would it take for our community to know that we loved one another and were unified?

You would think that Paul's praise of these believers would be sufficient to encourage them to continue in love and unity but he emphasized again in **Ephesians 4:1-3** that they needed to continue to pursue unity:

1 I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Have you ever pursued something with laser-beam focus and unbelievable intensity? That is the picture that Paul paints for the believers in Ephesus here in this text. They had a responsibility to pursue, with great intensity, unity within the church. That is the same responsibility we have today as church members. In Paul's mind this is not an option! Rainer wrote:

"You have a responsibility as a church member. You are to be a source of unity. You are never to be a divisive force. You are to love your fellow church members unconditionally. And while that doesn't mean you agree with everyone all the time, it does mean you are willing to sacrifice your own preferences to keep unity in the church."



What can you do to pursue unity in this church? What happens if we don't pursue unity in the church?

Paul, in his letter to the church in Colossae, gives us a glimpse of what it takes to create unity in the church. He encourages the believers in this church to "put on" something that will lead to unity. In **Colossians 3:14**, Paul wrote:

14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

We saw in our last session that love serves as the foundation for just about everything in the church. For the church in Corinth, they needed to be reminded that their spiritual gifts were useless without love (1 Cor. 13). For the church in Colossae, they needed to be reminded that unity (“perfect harmony”) in the church is only possible when love is present.



Why do you think love is so important in the church? How can you demonstrate love for other believers in the church and how can that help create unity?

2. Gossip & Negative Talk Will Destroy Unity In The Church

It is clear that unity is important in the church but we must be acutely aware of how unity can be destroyed in the church. In the same way that cancer will destroy the physical body, gossip and negative talk will destroy the church if left unchecked. Is gossip really that big of a deal? Consider the various sins Paul outlines in **Romans 1:29-31**:

29 *They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips,*

30 *slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, 31 foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 32* *Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.*

The context of these verses focuses on what happens when people refuse to worship God as their Creator and instead worship themselves. Paul identifies a pretty nasty list of sins that will characterize people who fail to worship the God

as their Creator. We must never lose sight of the seriousness of the sins of gossip and slander! Both will destroy the church if they are not dealt with appropriately.



What is a good definition of gossip? Why is the sin of gossip so damaging in the church?

Rainer wrote,

“This chapter is about unity. And few things can destroy the unity of a church like gossip. A unified church is powerful. Gossip tears apart that unity and renders a church powerless.”

We must deal with the issue of gossip in the church and Rainer offers two helpful responses:

1. “Don’t be a source of gossip. If you have any doubt whether something is gossip or not, don’t mention it. Keep your tongue under control.”
2. If someone in the church begins to share gossip with you, gently rebuke him or her. You don’t have to be harsh in your response to them. Kindly say that you would rather not hear any gossip and you would hope it wouldn’t continue to spread.”

It is easy to overlook gossip and slander in the church but we must realize the cost of doing nothing. Consider James’ words to the believers in **James 3:6**:

6 *And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.*

Also, consider Peter’s encouragement to his readers in **1 Peter 3:10-11**:

10 For, "Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; **11** let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it."



What happens if gossip is not dealt with in the church? What is the best path to take if someone brings gossip to you in your church?

3. Forgiveness Will Foster Unity In The Church

Unity can be destroyed easily by gossip in the church but forgiveness will foster unity in the church. Every person living on this planet has experienced hurt in some capacity. It is even possible that this hurt has come at the hands of fellow believers and even fellow church members. So what does forgiveness have to do with unity in the church? Paul gives us some perspective in **Colossians 3:12-13**:

12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, **13** bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Forgiveness is a central component of believers living in harmony with one another in the local church. In fact, the way we forgive says something about the way we understand our own forgiveness. Jesus said, in Matthew 6:14-15:

14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, **15** but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

According to this verse, it is impossible to have a right relationship with God if we are not willing to forgive others. Forgiveness is so important to Jesus that he

tells his disciples that they need to be willing to forgive others without hesitation. They are so bold as to ask him how many times they are to forgive a brother if he sins against them (7 times) and Jesus responds that they are to be willing to forgive this brother 490 times (Matthew 18:22)!



How is forgiveness related to unity in the local church? What does the Bible say about forgiving one another?

Rainer wrote:

“Each local church is made up of imperfect members and imperfect pastors. We will make mistakes. We will all sin. Yes, we are all hypocrites. Church unity is torn apart when members refuse to forgive, when any member is too prideful to grant forgiveness. Remember, Christ loved us so much that He died on a cross to forgive us. And now, as He has forgiven us, so we must forgive others. It is essential to the unity of your church.”



Are you still holding onto an offense against you by a fellow believer? What keeps you from being willing to forgive them?

Rainer closes each chapter with a pledge that he asks each church member to sign and date:

THE SECOND PLEDGE

I am a church member.

I will seek to be a source of unity in my church. I know there are no perfect pastors, staff, or other church members. But neither am I. I will not be a source of gossip or dissension. One of the greatest contributions I can make is to do all I can in God's power to help keep the church in unity for the sake of the gospel.

(Name)

(Date)