

# Christ Presbyterian Church

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John Crosby

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## Building Blocks of Faith: The Unified Church

This is the last of the building block series, talking about the idea of being one church, our unity as a church in a very fractured world. How do we protect that? How do we maintain it when so much wants to pull us apart? Why do we get the idea that unity is a big deal? I think this issue is fascinating. How many of you have ever heard a song from one of the most popular rock bands in the world, U2? They are by far the most popular group in the world. Their recent tour is finishing up. Just two more and it will be a half-a-billion-dollar tour, 102 cities. They have sustained over 30-plus years this incredible front edge of music and art. Their leader, Bono, has become world famous as not only a singer and musician artist, but as a philanthropist and social reformer. The reason this was on my mind, of course, is that even if you don't listen to music, you saw on the news last night that U2 was in concert over in St. Paul. 63,000 insane people out there for hour after hour as drizzle turned into a downpour, a downpour turned into a deluge, and they kept playing, and the people kept sitting and screaming together.

I wasn't able to go to that one, thankfully. I've been there other times when Bono has sung. I looked on the set sheet to see if he sang my favorite song. He and I are both Irish. My favorite U2 song is called *Sunday Bloody Sunday* about the 1972 massacre in Derry, Ireland, a terrible thing. His lyrics include the verse, *How long will I have to sing this song?* about how he doesn't want to have to sing that song. Last night I looked up an interview he did about *Bloody Sunday* and he said, "I did this song to point out the awful irony of the fact that these two warring faiths, Catholic and Protestant, share the same belief in the one God and thought, 'How absurd that I would sing this song on Easter Sunday,'" the first time he performed it. The spirit of the song speaks louder than the flesh. It makes it appropriate for us to do that on a day when some folks are celebrating the ability to have gay marriage in New York and other people are protesting that same ability. We are being pulled together and torn apart.

Why is it important that the church be one? Listen to Jesus' last words. He says,

<sup>13</sup> I am coming to you (to be with you in heaven) now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they (my disciples) may have the full measure of my joy within them.

<sup>20</sup> My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will (come to) believe in me through their message, <sup>21</sup> that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup> I have given them (not only the joy but) the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them (that is, loved the world) even as you have loved me.

## Unity, the Fifth Building Block of Our Faith

That is why the idea of unity is the fifth building block in this sermon series. Because the time to talk about unity in the church is now while this particular church is unified and, hopefully, healthy before storms come and tear the roofs apart, let's talk about what will hold us together because the passage points out that the world is watching. Others will know that God loves them when they love each other in God's Name. Jesus says when we experience unity, we will also experience joy, the joy that comes from a community where people know who we are and love us anyway. Then he says we will have the glory, the power to live a different kind of life because we are together.

I think that without the kind of unity that Jesus is talking about here, we run into the inability to see life as it really is. Part of that is that if the church is not one, then we start to think that those people are more important than *those* people. The people who speak must be more important than the people who pick up the trash, which may sound true until we can't get to the place where the hero speaks because of all the trash. We are together in this. I think Jesus is also saying that unity is crucial because the name of the evil one is Splitter. To be Satan means to be the splitter-aparter. Split us from God. Split us away from each other. It is a mark of obedience to the God that we say that we love, to the God that we say that we follow, that we would learn to love one another. Wouldn't you want to be part of that kind of church? I know I want to have a place in a *one* church, but what does it look like 2,000 years later?

Two thousand years later about a third of seven billion people on Planet Earth have heard the words of Jesus and said, "I believe that." A third of us. Between two and three billion people say, "I am one with those others who believe in Jesus." Here in the States, we have less than 6 percent of the world's population, but we have over 300,000 different churches. There are more than 38,000 denominations around the globe with wildly different structures and traditions and beliefs. My favorite is Korea because until about a hundred years ago, there really was no Korean church, but then Presbyterian missionaries went to Korea and founded hospitals and schools and brought the faith of their fathers and their mothers to Korea, and now a third of Korea, almost 40 percent, claims the Name of Christ because of primarily one denomination. But that one denomination has turned into over 2,000 different Christian denominations just in Korea. Some of those denominations have two churches. Some of them have thousands. The saying is, if you get three people who are Korean in the same room in Korea, you have four denominations present.

But it is not just over there. It is not just in Northern Ireland where they kill each other, Protestant and Catholic. It is all around us in small towns. As a matter of fact, I showed Mike two small churches, one Catholic and one Presbyterian, and the Catholics tried to bring people into the church by putting a sign up saying "All dogs go to heaven." How can you argue with that? Well, apparently the Presbyterians did. They argued, and they said, "No! All dogs don't go to heaven. Only humans go to heaven. Read the Bible." Okay, they win. Not quite. The Catholics responded to them and said, "God loves all His creatures including dogs." Dogs included. Well, the Presbyterians wouldn't be stopped, of course, and they responded, "Dogs don't have souls. This is not open for debate." By now the Catholics were getting into it because they were the first church, right? And so they said, "Catholic dogs go to heaven. Presbyterian dogs can go up to their pastor." I would have thought that that ended it, but the Presbyterians immediately responded, "Converting to Catholicism does not magically grant your dog a soul." And the Catholics, not to be stopped said, "Free dogs' souls with conversion." They come along with it. Okay, now we have moved a long way down the road, but the Presbyterians come back, "Dogs

are animals. There aren't any rocks in heaven either." Catholics wouldn't be stopped, and they end the argument with this. "All rocks go to heaven." We laugh at that because we know how true it is, right?

## What Divides Us

While we would love it if all of our arguments as Christians had that same flavor, a Lake Wobegon kind of flavor, they don't. How many of you here or someone you know have experienced the pain of a bad church split or a church fight or where you or someone you love has actually left their church because of all the in-fighting? Just raise your hands. Over half of you! Why do we divide so easily? Sometimes churches get divided because they are so healthy that they are growing and they want to grow in new places like a franchise. They establish a franchise six or ten or twelve miles away but that is not usually the way we divide. Usually humans have such a sinful tendency to divide that it is **my way or the highway**.

I think the second reason that churches divide is the most common. It is the **pride of the believers**. They enflame their people and, instead of making us one, they make us better or smarter or holier or, frankly, it is the sinfulness of the leaders. They get caught with their hand in the cookie jar or being sexually immoral and instead of saying, "I was wrong; follow her or follow him." They say, "I am falsely accused. Come and start another church down the road." And the church splits.

The third reason I think churches divide is that there are **theological disagreements** on one side or the other or both sides think it is so important to believe this that if you don't believe this, either you can't stay or I have to leave. Over and over and over for issues that now seem small and petty to us or that still seem very important to us. Not only can we not get along, we cannot sit in the same church together.

The fourth reason I think churches divide is that there is **no truth to the idea that one size fits all**. I have a long history with and great friends in the African-American church. A lot of my best colleagues are in the African-American church and some of whom have come here, led worship and I've gone there. One of them, Al Gallman, said, "John, I love your church. Dude, you put me to sleep." And I said, "Al, I love your church but I couldn't sing that long every week. It would just kill me." He says, "We're just getting warmed up!" The idea that we would do as well in the other person's church seems silly to us. God made us different, in background, in language, in temperament. Sometimes the differences of people are abused and racism or classism becomes the great divider even extending into the church. That is what Dr. King meant. He didn't mean that everybody should be in the same Baptist church he grew up in, singing two hymns, an offering, and a hymn. He meant that we should not have the most segregated hour of our society on Sunday mornings.

The fifth of a list that could go on and on of the reasons we get divided is what I call the **innovation gap**. These screens here hide drums and electric guitars from your sacred eyes because you worship the holy organ. They put a shroud over the organ because they don't know what that is. Innovation when it bangs up against tradition causes friction. Sometimes that friction causes a split and both sides lose. "We've never done it that way before" bumps into, "Well, if you can't change, we can't stay."

## The Blessings of Our Unity Here

That is a little of why I think we get divided but I wanted to make this talk about *our* church personal for us. I wanted to say that I thank God constantly for the unity that this church has experienced in my 22-plus years and of Roger Anderson's tenure here. The blessing of our unity is in many ways because of the **healthy legacy** that we have all inherited from Roger and the lay leaders around him. Very unusually, I am only the second pastor in a church that is 57 years old and his legacy included a model of Godly and servant and humble leadership that addressed conflicts and was humble enough to know what to fight for.

I think the second reason we have been blessed by unity here is that, frankly, we have been an outlier. We have been disconnected from the denomination, the Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A., PCUSA. We have primarily been marked by a **Mere Christianity kind of church**, where it is presbyterian with a small "p," and not at all ashamed of being Presbyterian, a lot of good stuff from there, but the Presbyterian brand has not been allowed to divide us.

Third, I think there is a blessing here because for 57 years there has been a **sense of motion**; that is, we are on our way someplace else. When organizations or churches stop, they start to squabble. That is like a rowboat that is doing fine as long as it is going across the lake, but as soon as it stops, the waves start to tip it around and, by the grace of God, I feel like we have been prevented from experiencing the division of stagnation.

The fourth thing ties into that. That sense of motion is because **we have felt like the main thing should be the main thing** and we have tried to clarify again and again and again why we are doing what we are doing because of our main thing. Wherever you are here in faith, if you are here for a month or more, we want you to know that our main thing means that you should know the life-changing grace of Jesus Christ. You should take your next step in faith, wherever it is, step 2 or step 2,002. You should get out of the pew and get into the game. That is our main thing. We want to lift Christ and His grace up for all of us. We want to ask you to take your next step and we want to say, "You will have a lot fewer fights if you get out of the pew and into the Habitat House, out of the pew and into caring for the children, out of the pew and bringing others the love of Jesus."

The last thing I would say has blessed our union here has nothing to do with us. I think that we have experienced a season of unity that is just a **gift from God**. Other very good, very smart, very holy churches around us have been divided and we have been blessed by unity. The key is, in that season of unity, have we learned lessons in times of health that will help us in times of storm because I see threats to our unity here?

## What Threatens Our Unity

Let me quickly give you five things that threaten our unity. I think the first threat is **change**. We live in an increasingly polarized society with a 24/7 media that provokes people to outlandish, extreme positions that whack away at the idea of moderation. If you don't believe that, look what happened at the State Capital last month, what is happening in the Nation's Capital this month. The voices in the middle are drowned out by the voices on the left and the voices on the right. We have a media obsessed with provoking confrontation and, in this particular church, this particular wave of the church, focusing on one small part of human sexuality, homosexuality, and making the whole thing revolve around that one issue. I believe that that is a sign of change in our culture more than it is of change in the faith.

The last thing that I would point to about this idea of what threatens our unity in terms of change is that many of the first people who came to this church came here because they were Presbyterians. They wanted to be Presbyterians. We have now far fewer of those people. We are in danger of getting a lot more consumers than participants.

The second thing that threatens our unity, I believe, is **turmoil**. By membership CPC is the largest PCUSA church in the Upper Midwest and our denomination has experienced 40 years, longer than I have been ordained, of turmoil, every single gathering marked by turmoil. On behalf of the elders at CPC I want to say we are far less concerned with the name that hangs on the corner, the denominational affiliation we have, than we are with the unity and faithfulness of this congregation—our health. The Bible only portrays two kinds of churches. There is the local church, Corinth, Ephesus, Jerusalem, and Rome and then there is the church universal, the Body of Christ, all over the world, all through time. I put a long quote from C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters* in your Bulletin because that is the church that we talk about, the church universal. Instead, in a time when organizations like denominations, are dying left and right, we can get sucked into fighting over a sinking ship. I don't want that for us. We live in a new world. How will we get to the future instead of how will we fight about the past?

The third threat is **success**. I don't think there really are successful churches. I think we are just a bunch of gathered sinners but, in many ways, we have grown because we have reached out beyond the brand. Fewer than 12 percent of you grew up Presbyterian. Many of you grew up beyond the faith. The Reveal Study that we did five years ago now which over 1,200 of you participated in showed that of those 1,200 people who took the survey. Seventeen percent said they started coming to this church but they had not yet made a decision to follow Christ. Twenty-four percent of those 1,200 people said they had come to follow Christ for the first time in their lives in the last five years. Seventeen percent and 24 percent makes 41 percent of our people who said that they are not yet in or brand new to an historical faith. I've got to tell you, that thrills me. That is the kind of church I want to be part of, where you don't have to know all the Bible verses. You don't have to be here forever. You don't have to wear the right thing. Please take this the right way. I love it when somebody comes up to me and says, "You know, I just talked to someone and they said, "Wow, that was a hell of a sermon, wasn't it?" I love that. But it shouldn't surprise us that we have much less social consensus when we have that kind of diversity.

Threat four is that, in spite of all the work that all of you do, I believe that the larger we get the easier it is to talk about this than to talk *with* people, to talk about them instead of talking *with* them and **gossip**, whether it is the 9:30 crowd, the 11:00 crowd, the Saturday night crowd, or the Sunday night crowd. They aren't going to know what we are talking about, but these other environments are talking to each other instead of talking *with the elders or with the pastors*. Gossip is the work of the Evil One because when you gossip, all you do is reinforce your perceptions. You don't talk to anybody who has a different idea.

The last threat, I believe, is a counterpart of something I said earlier. I believe that division is the result of **spiritual attack**. I think the Evil One wants to split us up and stop what God is doing here. We need to decide that that will not happen.

### **What Does *Not* Unite**

How do you stop division? Let me give you a couple things that don't work, things that do not unite, and the reason I know is because I've tried them all. We don't believe any more that **regulation** produces unity. Structure doesn't produce unity. Tradition does not produce unity.

The songbook does not produce unity. That just holds us together in a box for a while but it will not resolve any of the things that push us apart.

Second, I don't believe that **tolerance** produces unity. I think tolerance is a hugely important, necessary precondition for people that hang together. I do not think that tolerance historically offers much promise—that, over time, just tolerance of people who think bad things produces unity. I don't think it does. I think it produces everything anybody wants to believe is okay and I don't think that is okay.

The third thing that does not unite us is **proximity**. We don't believe any more that just being in the same room brings unity, fellowship, time together. Some of my friends say, "If we can just talk about this forever, then we will all agree." We won't because we have said that the talking is more important than the agreeing. So relationships, as important as they are, are necessary to give us a sense of humanizing the other side but relationship by itself does not bring unity.

Yet in the same way I think that we have come to believe that **happy talk** does not bring unity. I talked with three or four different couples of marriages in crisis since I've returned and what is striking to me is that they have persistently avoided the hard conversations until it was too late. They have over and over run away without addressing the hard things. They have sat here and there and up there, none of you, but in those few places in the sanctuary, every week I know where they sit, they grin and they look like everything is okay, but it is not. Whether in churches or in marriage, happy talk is never enough.

The last one I would say that I have tried again and again is that I don't think that **grace without truth** brings unity. That is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace. "I want everybody to love one another in this church. I'm willing to do anything so that we all love one another." That is cheap grace. Neither, however, do I believe that truth without grace produces unity. That just drives out everybody who disagrees with you until there are just two of you in the room, and then the largest person kicks the smaller person out, so it has got to be grace *and* truth. Grace or truth is a false choice.

## What Does Create/Preserve Unity

Let me finish with what I think does bring unity, does create what Jesus said, "That they might be one as you and I are in one." The first thing to realize is that human beings by themselves cannot preserve unity. It is not a human thing. It is a God thing. Only the Spirit of God, only the Spirit of Christ, not tradition, not structure, not relationships, can bring unity. **We need to be *in* Christ.** I pray that they might be in me as I am in you. What does *in* Christ mean? Well, it's a big subject, but let me give you one side of that. When the apostle Paul talks to the Philippians, he says, "I pray that your attitude would be the same as was *in* Christ," that you would have the same attitude that we see *in* Christ. What is that attitude?

<sup>5</sup> In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

<sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; <sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

If we want to be *in* Christ, we need to have the *in*-Christ attitude, marked by humility and serving

one another in obedience even when obedience brings us death on a cross. That means to be united in Christ that we have a like mind. Our minds are Christ's mind. We are like-minded and we are not in conformity. The mind of Christ does not produce clones at all. The mind of Christ says, "We want to think like Jesus would think in this situation," and the way that that has been reflected through the ages of the church, the reformed church and the Catholic church before it, is what are called the confessions. Just keep us sort of in the same road the church universal wrote down, what it was that unites through all those times. Every time we baptize here, we recite the Apostles' Creed. That is one of the earliest church confessions. Presbyterians are big on confessions. We have got about 17 of them, including some that are almost homemade. To be like-minded means that we confess things like the physical resurrection, the death of our sins, the need for the Holy Spirit's grace. It is a supernatural faith that we share with generations past.

The second thing that comes in this like-mindedness, not all of us thinking the same, is that we say, "Here is what we believe" in a short enough phrase, in a short enough place, to be chewed on so that people could say, "Well, I don't believe that." And we could say, "I understand that. We are not asking you to believe that. We are just saying, 'This is what we believe.'" This is CPC's statement of faith. It's been out about five years. We are going to have copies of this on the round table as we go away, and you will see that it starts with, and the bulk of it is, the Apostles' Creed. This is what Christians have believed throughout the ages.

Then we have added to that—the **authority of Scripture and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ**. I would encourage you if you want to ask, "Is this my kind of church?" to see whether you would stand with us as we try to think *like* Christ.

Coming out of unity in Christ, I believe, means that we need **safe places** for hard conversations. Churches that don't have conflict are not healthy churches. They are ducking hard issues or they are parking them at the door. Churches that experience hard conversations need to have safe places. I have had several very challenging, difficult conversations with elders and with staff people, and we are saying, "This is a safe place for us to whack away at each, to learn from each other, to say 'This is what Christians *do*' instead of saying, 'Don't let the door hit your butt on the way out.'" We try to stay together. What that means is that this needs to be a safe place; that we value other people as children of God over the stupidity of their opinions—I mean, we value other people as children of God over the stupidity of *our* opinions. Together! So if you change your mind about women in ministry here or about gay marriage here or about abortion here or about the timing of the tribulation in a premillennial eschatology or about the amount of water to be used in a second baptism for speaking in tongues, are you still welcome here? Yes! Please! We don't believe you can believe just anything here but we believe that we are all beloved of God.

The fourth way that I believe that God brings unity is to **engage** us in our life together. I talked about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian, before. Life together means part of this is saying and fighting and arguing about what we believe but part of it is living together and learning to love one another when we disagree and finding something that we both do agree on that is Godly that we can do together. It is an odd thing but one of the strongest memories I have of this church is the memory of a friend of mine and I on two ladders at a Habitat for Humanity house 20 years ago. We were just getting to know each other and Bob and I were bonded because the woman above us kept dropping her hammer on the roof. Really, she would drop her hammer, and it would go boom, boom, boom, boom, *bang*, right into one of us. So after a while, when we heard *bang*, both of us would duck in and it would go right over one of us.

Then after it hit the ground, we would hear the person up on the roof say, “Sorry!” That was twenty years ago and we are still telling that story. We are engaged in life together. This community needs to be tested, not just by what it says but how it lives.

The idea that a church can be made into the kind of body that Jesus talked about that experiences the unity of grace and truth is only possible if it begins with **me**, if it begins with **you**. It is only possible if I can turn to you and say, “What is your part in the unity of the Spirit of God in this community?” I want the churches of the PCUSA to have a fruitful, healthy life together. It is not like I don’t care about them but I don’t care about them anything like I care about *us* and what God is doing here. A theologian left me this quote. She said, “I think church unity can sound so big, we think it’s not up to us. But peace in the church starts with peace in *my* relationships, *my* home, *my* neighborhood, *my* small group, *my* church.” She said, “I need to own Romans 12:18.”

<sup>18</sup> If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

That is theologian Laura Crosby! The famous preacher, Chuck Swindoll, says it is amazing to him how often the Holy Spirit sounds like his wife and that is true in my family as well.

So will you be a part of the solution for unity here or will you be passive? If you are passive, you are part of the problem. If you don’t care, you are part of the problem because it requires an active solution. It requires you to be a listener, a defender of both grace and truth, a grower, somebody who is willing to come and argue things out, an outreach— a person who reaches out—especially to those that they don’t know, especially to those with whom they don’t agree. Will you be part of this process by being a peacemaker? Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers. They will be called the children of God.” You and I have been given an incredible gift of the church community where God has spoken for 57 years. By and large with all of our petty squabbles, and they are there all of the time, has kept us remarkably one. Will we continue seeking God’s grace, seeking God’s truth, to do that together? Not all of us will want to stay. That is okay but the way that we treat one another is at least as important as the conclusions that we reach.

Lord God, I pray that Your Word has been in this word, that Your Spirit will plant seeds of truth and seeds of grace in the hearts and minds and tongues of my sisters and brothers here. That You will preserve the bond of peace among us, that we might together see how deep and how wide, how far extends the love of God for every single child here. Bring us peace and help us to be peacemakers. In the Name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. And all God’s children said,

All: Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*