

# Maintaining The Unity Of One Spirit, Ephesians 4:3

2015 Sola Scriptura Conference

By Jeffrey D. Johnson

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## **Edgewood Reformed Baptist Church**

501 Travis St.

West Monroe, LA 71291

**Website:** <http://iamedgewood.org/>

**Online Sermons:** <http://www.sermonaudio.com/edgewoodrefbap>

The following is a presentation of Edgewood Reformed Baptist Church, West Monroe, LA.

He is a good brother and I appreciate him. I appreciate you guys. It's amazing how quick and how fast you can make friends and it's a wonderful thing that there is something deeper about Christianity than just being an outward organization. We're not just getting together because we have something in common, we believe in particular things but we have something deeper. We have a relationship with Christ and that relationship endears us to all those who have a relationship with Christ. That brings a real unity. I want to say something, I'm going to use a word I hardly ever use because it's a dangerous word but in this case, it's appropriate: there is a mystical union between God's people and it's real. It's there.

I remember going to Bridgeport, Connecticut and I'm in the Bible belt and all of the colleges where I'm from have an array of Bible campus ministries and Christianity is pretty prominent. I go up to Bridgeport, Connecticut and I go to the Baptist student union which happened to be the only Christian organization on the campus and there were 3 people, which was astonishing to me. But prior to going there, I had a little shocked in my college days. I'm up in Bridgeport, Connecticut. I'm shocked by the lack of Christianity and being around many non-Christians that weekend, I was ready for Christian Fellowship. I was ready to be around the things of God and I remember going to this Baptist student union and just craving spiritual fellowship, craving the things of God because I was without those things for a while and at the student union there was only me, my friend that I was with and an older Chinese woman who could not speak English. She looked at me and she held out her Bible and she could say a few words and she held out her Bible and she said, "Are you a Christian?" And I said, "Yes." And she reached up and grabbed hold of me and hugged me deeply. It was like we always knew one another but we could not speak to one another. There is some mystical union, some mystical fellowship that all Christians share and we have, not because of an outward membership agreement, even though I believe in church membership, not because we come and hold to the same outward confession of faith and I love the 1689, but that's not where our unity comes from. It comes from our union, our spiritual union in Jesus Christ

and that's what pulls us together. That's what makes us one. That's why there is only one body. Some people say, "Well, there's one body that's yet to come." No, there is one body now.

Christ's body has always been one and I want to talk about this evening the importance of us maintaining that oneness, maintaining that unity. Not creating it but maintaining it. Fostering it. You see, in our churches, there are 3 main things that we must be focused on, 3 things that really are important to all churches. I know there are 9 marks of a healthy church and I actually would add a 10th one, I would add Christian fellowship to Martin Dever's book. I think all of those 9 marks are wonderful but all of those 9 marks could be summarized into 3 headings. Three things that our churches should be concerned about, focused on and make sure we do these 3 things well. It's not the way we do worship. It's not the style of worship. It's not our buildings or any of these external things. These are the 3 things that are vital to a church because they are a part of the very makeup and essence of the church and that is truth. We should be known for the truth as we are the pillar and ground of truth, especially as we already heard today, our churches should be known principally for the Gospel. We should be known for the Gospel. The number 1 mark of our church is, "Well, what kind of church is that? Is it a family integrated church? Is it a reformed church? Is it a confessional church?" The thing that should stand out above all other things is that this is a Gospel saturated church. Truth is a vital part of the church. Second is holiness. The objective of the church is to make disciples that we all will obey everything that the Lord has commanded and ultimately that we might be presented to God holy, spotless and without blemish. Holiness is the objective of the church. But the third thing and the one in which I want to focus on is unity. So if you think about a healthy church, you need a church that is full of truth, full of holiness and full of unity. Those are the 3 main building blocks of the local church.

Turn with me to Ephesians 4. As we think about Ephesians 4, we'll read verses 1 through 16 but I'm going to actually take verse 3 and that's going to be our text. But as we read verses 1 through 16, we'll see that truth, holiness and unity are intermixed into this text and this text hits on all 3 of those things, truth, holiness and unity, but we're going to highlight the importance of oneness of the church or the unity of the church or the unity of the Holy Spirit. Starting in verse 1,

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. 4 There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call - 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. 7 But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. 8 Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." 9 (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? 10 He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all

things.) 11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Now, as I said, we're going to take that text and we will refer to various portions of that text as we go through but mainly this is a topical message focused on verse 3. We are to be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." We need to realize how beautiful unity is. Psalm 133:2, David says, "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!" There is nothing like it on earth. There is nothing like the saints gathered together in corporate worship and there is a spirit of love, peace and unity. It's unparalleled. There is nothing that takes us closer to heaven on earth than being with the saints in a spirit of unity. There is nothing like it. It is precious. It is precious to God. It is valuable to God and it is precious to us his saints.

But not all churches experience such beauty, such unity. Sadly, not all churches seek to maintain this unity and distractions, discord, cliques, can often abound in even the best of churches. It's easy for cliques to splinter off and even a slight, subtle spirit of disharmony to come about in churches. Why would good churches split if this wasn't the case? Or deal with much trouble? "Well Jeff, that's not my church." Well, it is mine and I have a great church. I have a very solid church. I am proud to be the pastor of the saints that God has put me over as an under shepherd. But the reason I know that this is a problem is 1. that God tells me that we have to maintain this and 2. I have sin in my life and there is still sin in our lives and sin is the root cause behind disharmony. So I know this is a constant battle. It's something that we must be alert and aware of. We must be doing all that we can to endeavor to keep this unity because if we are not maintaining this, endeavoring, keeping a watchful eye on this, discord will seep into our churches and the devil loves nothing more than to sow discord among the saints.

But we are to maintain. We are to be eagerly maintaining the unity that we already have, already possess in the Spirit and what I want to do this evening, I want to give us 12 practical ways for us to do this. 12 things that we can do to maintain the unity of the Spirit. First of all, as our verse commands us, we need to understand that maintaining unity in our churches is our responsibility. It's not just the pastor's responsibility. It's not just the church leader's responsibility. It's every member's responsibility to do their part to maintain the unity of the Spirit. So all of us here tonight need to raise our hand and our hearts and say, "This is my responsibility. When I go back home to my church, I need to do what I can to foster unity, to maintain the unity of the Spirit."

Starting in verse 1, he says, "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called." We have been called unto this, "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." You see, this unity was created by the Holy Spirit. It's intrinsic within Christ's body. It's one of the reasons that we know that Christ has come into the world is because the brethren love one another. They have a deep love and a love that even is stronger than family ties.

"There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call - one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." Though we possess this unity through our fellowship and union in Jesus Christ, because we are all united to Christ, we are all, if you would, in him, then that makes us all linked together. We are knotted together. By being united to Christ, we become united to one another.

But this exhortation for us to do what we can or to be eager to maintain or to guard or to keep or to foster unity implies that we cannot take unity for granted. This is not something you can say you can put on cruise control and say, "Okay, unity is established. We have that. Let's move on to something else." It's something that each week and every month that we need to be mindful, "What am I doing to guard against discord? What am I doing to maintain or even foster deeper love for the saints?"

Listed here are many of the traits needed for unity. See in verse 2 it says that we are to walk "worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love." All these things are needed traits, attributes. These fruits of the Spirit are given to us because they are needed if we are going to maintain the unity. The command is for us to utilize these traits in order to maintain the unity of the Spirit because selfishness still exists within all of us and therefore sin still exists within the church. You wonder why God allows sin to take place in the church and people to offend one another, to say something that is offensive? Why does God allow that in his church? So we can be patient. So that we can be forgiving. So that we can be caring and loving. So that we can exercise the fruits of the Spirit. You see, these fruits of the Spirit will not be needed in heaven. They are not needed in heaven. I don't need long-suffering when I get to heaven. I don't need patience when I get to heaven. I don't need forgiveness when I get to heaven. But I sure need them here. These are attributes that God has given to us so that we can have the tools necessary to maintain this precious unity that God has given to his people.

We are called to exhibit and display the fruits of the Spirit. You say, "Well, I don't want to forgive." Well, here's your opportunity to prove that you are a Christian. Here's your opportunity to display these wonderful fruits of the Holy Spirit. This charge is a responsibility that we must endeavor. We must be ever present working on. This means that unity does not maintain itself or it is able to be disrupted. We must consciously be mindful that we need to love, we need to be humble and we need to be patient.

So this is the first practical way for us to maintain the unity of the Spirit and it is our responsibility to exhibit the fruits of the Spirit, that we maintain the unity of the Spirit by being long-suffering, patient and kind, forbearing one another in love. Secondly, we maintain, we need to understand that we maintain the unity of the Spirit, we need to understand that sowing discord is a sin. Neglect of this command is a sin. If we do not do what we can to foster unity, we are sinning against God. Is this not a command that God has given us? Do all that we can to endeavor? To live peaceably with all men especially the brethren?

Proverbs 6:16-19, Solomon says, "There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies," all these things bring discord, right? But he ends at the seventh one, "and one who sows discord among the brothers." This is something God hates. He hates it so if we are a cause for disunity or discord, this is something God hates. We need to realize this is a great sin. Strife and discord are easy to sow but woe to those who plant such wicked seeds in God's vineyard. That which divides God's people and tears the unity of the church is a great sin indeed. If we are commanded to maintain the unity of the Spirit, then we must realize that we sin against God and God's Spirit when we initiate discord, strife or division within the church. Unity is a precious thing. We must value it and protect it and treasure it and guard against any forms of discord.

Thirdly, we need to understand we have a vested interest in one another. You know, in verses 15 through 16, he explains how we are united together with one another. It says, "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love." We think of ourselves as here is a magnet and I'm a ball and that ball is attracted to the magnet. The magnet is Christ and it's just me in Christ. But rather, don't think of just a magnet and one separate piece of metal being drawn to Christ. Look at Christianity as more as a bunch of ball bearings that are all pulled together through that one uniting source, the power of Christ. And when you're in that collection, you're being pulled to Christ but you may be in the middle of all the other ball bearings. But that magnetism is being pulled, not just directly from Christ, but indirectly from all the other ball bearings and we're held together through our common unity in Jesus Christ so our union with Christ brings us in union with one another and it is through this union with the church that keeps me held together with Christ. You see, God has designed the Christian life, as we talked about last night, where we are made incomplete without each other. This means that my spiritual growth cannot be completely done outside the local church. I'm not to live only for myself but I need to realize that I need to live holy for the benefit of all those that I am a member of.

Think of this: our Christian life is not just for me, myself and I. You know, the fruits of the Spirit are not there for me to enjoy but for others to enjoy. And I'm to live holy on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday, not just so I can better worship on Sunday. I'm to live holy Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and the rest of the

week so that I can help others live more holy and worship better on Sunday. You see, my own spiritual life has an either positive or negative ramification on those around me and I am responsible for living holy, not just for myself. I must live holy so I can be a better example, an encouragement for my family and my children but also for my church family. So if I'm sinning or neglecting my personal devotions and my heart is going away from Christ, I am not only hurting myself, I'm hurting the whole church. You see, because we're inner-connected and our spiritual lives are joined together. Thus we see unity is vital for our own spiritual growth. We need unity if we're going to grow in the maturity of Jesus Christ, come to that full stature of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We need to realize, though, unity is not uniformity. It's not all of us becoming a foot. Some people look at unity kind of like Islam looks at unity, you just all do the same thing and you're all the same part and you just fall in line. It doesn't matter what your heart looks like. It doesn't matter what your motives or intentions are just as long as your outward actions are in line that's all that matters. But that's not Christianity. Christianity is we're all different, made up of different parts and that's why we need one another. One cause of disunity is seeking to force uniformity. You say, "I'm an eye, everybody should be an eye. You know, I'm at prayer meeting all the time. I pray more fervently than anyone else. Why is this other brother not praying like I pray?" I'm not saying that he shouldn't pray more but maybe his gift is in giving and you don't know it but he probably outgives you. Or maybe he reads the Scriptures a little bit more than you but you don't know that.

It's good that we have multiple gifts and different strengths and we don't all need to necessarily be strong in the same area. You come into the church house and you say, "I just wish this church was more welcoming. I wish my church would reach out to visitors more. They don't seem to be concerned about visitors." Well, maybe you have that heart to reach out for visitors and maybe that's not necessarily the strength or the gift of this person or that person but it doesn't mean they're not vitally important to the body. You see, we begin to judge the body based upon our own strength and judging what a good Christian is by the things that comes easy to us, not realizing that our weaknesses need to be compensated by someone else's strength. None of us are the perfect, full, complete package. None of us. We have strengths and weaknesses and that's why we need one another. 1 Corinthians 12:14, "For the body does not consist of one member but of many." So to maintain unity, we need to humbly recognize that we need one another and we are gifted differently.

Fourthly, to maintain the unity of the Spirit, we must seek to grow together doctrinally. I insert this here because there is this false notion that doctrine divides and it is true that doctrine does divide but the Bible never looks at doctrine as a means of causing discord. In fact, rather our very text implies that if we're going to grow in unity, then we need to grow in doctrine and in truth. Look at verse 8, "Therefore it says, 'When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.'" In verse 11 it says, "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers." All these gifts that he mentions here have one thing in common: they all proclaim the word of God. They all teach and herald out God's word. "To equip the saints for the work of ministry,

for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God." You see, we grow in unity when we all grow more and more in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. That's why truth is so important. Doctrine doesn't divide, it really unites. It brings us closer into the thing that unites us the most and that is Jesus Christ. It is sin and error that divide and causes discord, not God's word.

However, we're told in this text that we are to speak the truth in love. The man of God must not quarrel but be patient and gentle, long-suffering. You know, there is a way to hold the truth, to maintain the unity of the Spirit. Truth does not divide but sometimes our manner in which we proclaim the truth will divide. I had a professor in college, my systematic teacher. A very wise man and very godly man in many ways but he was very difficult to approach. There was an arrogance about him. It always stuck to me when I read James. It says that wisdom that comes from above is most pure, it's gentle, it's easy to be entreated, it is not high minded. Those who are taught from above are humble, meek, lowly. That's the way we need to uphold the word of God with love and patience. This is how we maintain the unity of the Spirit.

Fifthly, here are just some practical things here. I mean, this is not a high theological sermon, this is just down to our level. What do we need to do to maintain the unity of the Spirit? We need to love those who are difficult to love. Every church has one or 2 people that are harder to love and be patient with. You know, because we are not perfect, we're like crooked sticks. The Puritan, Thomas Watson, reminds us that a group of Christians like a local church is similar to a pile of crooked sticks that when you seek to pick up and gather all these sticks, they're all crooked, that you can't carry very many at one time because they don't lay neatly. Now, if they were all straight, you could carry a pile of them easily but because they are all crooked, branches coming out everywhere, they are hard to carry, he says, unless you take a string, wrap it around the bunch of them and once you have the string, you can easily carry all those crooked sticks. He says, "The string that ties the saints together, the bond, if you would, that brings unity is the bond of love." Love is what maintains the unity of the Spirit. Colossians 3:14, love is the perfect bond of unity because love covers a multitude of sins.

For us to keep and maintain the unity of the Spirit, we must not be caught up on personality flaws or minor things of this nature but we must be able to look past these things. A critical spirit that easily finds fault and complains about the slightest disagreement is a symptom of pride and selfishness. But love thinks the best. One of the things that I've been practicing upon when I see someone over there whispering and I hear my name, I typically in the past think they are talking bad about me. We naturally assume the worst because we are prideful people. But I've been working on, "That is a good person. That is a man who loves God." I've been working on thinking the best of people and what a wonderful transformation that does when we assume the best in people rather than the worst. And that's what love does. Love thinks no evil. It rejoices not in wrongdoing. If we are able to love others as we love ourselves, then we should seek to give people the benefit of the doubt and think the very best of them.

So we should seek to love those in our church, especially those who are difficult to love. We should make that a priority. "I'm going to pray for this person." You have someone that rubs you wrong, make that your intent, "I'm going to pray for this person and talk to this person and get to know this person. I'm going to work past this until I have the unity of Spirit and a deep affection for him that overcomes all these minor things that may prevent me from ever having a close friendship or relationship with that person." Just some practical advice of how to handle these things.

Sixth, do not allow our hearts to be pulled away from the church. The fruit of the Spirit is love, humility, patience and all these things are heart issues, right? Before you can outwardly display patience, love and humility, you must have them within your heart but before you sow seeds of discord, it will happen first in your heart. A critical spirit takes place in your mind and no one is aware of it. You can go to church and have a critical spirit which is the beginning of discord. You can have a critical spirit and no one knows that you are unhappy because it's a mental thing. Before discord erupts openly, it usually takes place inwardly, however, once we become critical and unhappy with a few things without properly dealing with those things biblically, we become more and more susceptible to looking for more flaws. But once we start looking for problems, the floodgates will open up and all that we will see is offenses everywhere.

We may not leave the church immediately but our affections have already pulled away. Many people leave a church 6 months prior to their official letter of removal and the problem was not whatever reason they give you when they leave, it was 6 months prior to that they fostered a critical spirit in their heart and seeds of discord were already sewn. We must guard against that at the seed level, make sure that we have no bitterness or grudges with anyone within the church.

We must remember that it is a sin to harbor animosity for a fellow church member without seeking reconciliation. Proverbs 10:18 says, "The one who conceals hatred has lying lips," so if you have someone in your church that you are just not right with, that you just don't like to talk to, there is just something in between you 2 and it's just something small and minor and he may not even know about it or she may not even know about it, but with you, you know there's just something that just makes you a little uncomfortable with that person. That needs to be dealt with and if it's not big enough to address to that person directly, you need to be on your knees until God gives you a right spirit and heart about it. We remember that it is a sin to harbor animosity, thus we must be careful to guard our hearts from all forms of resentment, envy and pride. We must maintain a love for our brothers and never allow bitterness, contention, to separate our affections from God's people. We should go to church with a deep love for all the saints.

Seventh, here's another practical thing we can do: redirect gossip with words of grace. A critical spirit is contagious. It's amazing. It's one of those temptations that we easily fall into. Gossip can spread quickly throughout the congregation. I mean, it's like a forest fire. Subtle complaints even when they are legitimate often breed discontentment and discontentment often spreads until it causes division within the church. You know, stuff like this, it could be a legitimate think, "I wish the church was more welcoming to



visitors." Something like that. It could be something legitimate. Yeah, we need to be more welcoming. We're not doing a good job at that. Or our church is not as mission minded as we should be. That's a legitimate concern.

So sometimes it can start off with a legitimate concern and though these may be proper concerns, these complaints can be mishandled and then if they are mishandled, they can cause discord. It often starts with a simple concern but concern turns into gossip. Rather than seeking to handle the problem properly and say, "Let's go and talk to our elders and see what we can do to fix this in a proper way," what happens a lot of times, members begin to complain with other members and then this will happen, someone says, "I wish our church was more welcoming." The other person is like, "I really haven't thought about that but you're right and I wish our church was more mission minded." And the other one is like, "Well, I hadn't thought about that but you are right too." Then you have a host of things that is wrong with the church and then bitterness, a sense of criticalness comes in and then your heart is not wholly and totally with God's people. It's that easy.

Our critical spirit can lead to others having a critical spirit. I've seen this happen in our church. One person complains and it is spread around to another person and then the next thing I know I have 2 or 3 people addressing me about something that I knew had come from one person. We need not let our critical spirit influence others to be critical. Not only have we sin in our hearts, but we have led others to sin. But not only should we not gossip and spread a critical spirit in the church, we must fight against that. It's not wrong to have concerns but once we take pleasure in pointing out these flaws to others, then we have sinned and these minor concerns should be overlooked but if they are important enough to be addressed, they need to be addressed in a biblical fashion. A way to maintain this unity is when we hear other people complain, even if it's a legitimate complaint, there is a right way to deal with that. Ephesians 4:29 says, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear." There is never occasion, ever, ever, ever in our lives for us to ever say anything that destroys or tears down. Only that which builds up. If our concern is not for the good of those whom we are talking, then we should keep our mouths closed.

This command is to be implemented in every situation so when we hear a person complaining, there is no need for us in a practical level to say, "Hey, you're gossiping. You need to stop doing that." You know, there is another way and an easier way to get around that. If someone is complaining about Joe, "Oh, I love Joe. He's such a good man." That will stop it. "Oh, you're concerned about that in Joe? Do you want me to go with you and talk to him about that? I'd be glad to go with you. I know Joe is a good man. Let's go and talk to him." You see, that's a good way to deal with that and it's amazing, that turns the conversation and it not only just turns it and makes the other person feel a little ashamed but it might even change that person's heart about Joe. We can simply gently redirect the conversation. We are always to go and respond in a way that seeks to reconcile people together and build up our precious brothers and not tear them down. But if we do enter into gossip, we share in their sins.

Eighthly, this is important and this is something I've taught our church and not that we do it perfectly but we need to identify ourselves with the problems of the church. You know, we all have sins and problems in our own life but what we don't do when we see our own problems, we don't say, "Well, that's my other self. That's not me." I mean, we don't distance ourselves from ourselves when we see our problems. We seek in love, we seek to overlook those problems or we seek to correct those problems because we love ourselves. But when we see problems in the church, this is what typically happens. Here we're a member, we're a member of Edward Reformed Baptist Church and all of a sudden we want to complain about a problem, it's no longer this is our church, we go, "Edgewood Reformed Baptist Church is not very friendly to visitors." You see, all of a sudden, it's not my problem. I'm not one with the weakness. It's not our weakness, it's Edgewood Reformed Baptist Church. It's this church. I happen to be a member of it but it's not mine. We distance ourselves from the problems within the church.

It's never good for a pastor to hear someone say, they are a member of the church and come up to the pastor and say, "Well, the church here has this and this is something I'm concerned about." But how much better it is if they come to the elders and the leaders of the church and say, "You know, I'm concerned that we, our church, is not as welcoming as we could be. What can I do to help that?" In fact, that's my next point. One way to maintain and foster unity is fill in the gaps. Once we identify ourselves with the problems of the church, the next thing we need to do is realize when we see a problem is seek to meet it, not just complain about it. Rather than finding fault with the church and building up a resume of criticism in our minds, in our hearts, we should seek to be an example of friendliness to visitors. Now, I keep on hitting this visitor thing just as an illustration but it could be an array of problems or concerns that someone has. Once you see it, "Okay, this is a weakness. Our church needs to pray more. We don't pray enough corporately." Well, maybe that's a place where you say, "What can I do to begin to show an example of prayer and the necessity of prayer and the importance of prayer?" If we see a need, we should be the first one that says, "Okay, I'll take care of that. I'll fill that need. I'll be an example of that." You know, we don't necessarily need 100 people in the church all welcoming one visitor so all it takes is just one or 2 or 3 people who are conscious of that and it makes the whole church, represents the whole church. You see, these things can be dealt with in a proper way.

Tenthly and we're almost done, and this is vital, if we want to keep and maintain the unity of the Spirit, we need to humble ourselves before God. All the things that we have talked about to this point all depend on humility. Proud people are never satisfied. Never satisfied. That's where criticism comes from is from pride, "I deserve better. This doesn't meet my standard." But the meek and the humble are amazed that they have friends at all. They are amazed that they are accepted into the group. "You mean I can be a part of this church? Me be accepted among these people?" I remember going to a Bible conference and I don't know what was wrong with me but I drove down in a bad mood. I don't know all the scenarios but I got there just kind of testy, moody, complaining, grumpy. Everything was against me, I guess and I'm there and I'm in the pew and I don't know what it was, I'm just admitting to this, I was in a foul mood and I was complaining about everything and I could find fault in the preaching. I could find fault in the singing. I was

finding fault everywhere and I was becoming too big for my britches and I was sitting there and I was like, "This is just not right." I was full of pride and arrogance. But as the conference continued to go along and the preaching began to be more efficacious and sweet and the singing just more and more dear, by the end of the conference, I could not believe that any of these precious, wonderful people would even consider me their friend.

What a difference humility does. Pride will cause division. "It's got to be my way. It's got to be this color of the carpet." But humility prefers the other. It doesn't seek its own. Humility and love are the keys to unity. You realize God's people are precious? Hebrews tells us that the world doesn't even deserve them. They are unworthy for the saints of God and therefore the church, God's true church, you don't deserve to be among them. You don't deserve to be counted among the saints of God. We're the least among them. We are the chief of sinners. And for us to be too high for the saints is full of pride and that is the beginning of disharmony and division.

Paul reminds us in Philippians 2:1, "So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus." Do you know who the most humble person in the body of Christ is? Christ. Talk about finding fault, he could but he is meek. He is humble. He is full of grace and mercy. He is easy to be entreated. Out of all of us, he's the one who it is easiest for us to have fellowship with and we're to have that same mind, that same heart of humility toward the body of Christ.

Eleventhly, we are to submit to church discipline. You say, "Well Jeff, you don't understand where I'm going to church and the situation I'm in. What I'm dealing with is something that is more than just petty things. It's more than what color the carpet is. It's more than these little things that you're talking about. This is something major. You don't realize what they have done to me. What am I supposed to do? Am I to act as if nothing is wrong? How does love cover that sin?" But even so, even if we're in the worst situation, we are to seek to do all that we can to maintain the unity of the Spirit. We are never exempt from obeying this charge. There is never a situation where you can say, "Well, that doesn't apply to me now in this situation." However, there is a way to handle such difficult situations that we may be in. We're not to gossip or harbor critical spirits but we are to privately seek to maintain fellowship with the body by following the instructions of Matthew 18. That's why Jesus tells us what to do in such situations. If your brother offends you and you have a hard time inviting that brother over for dinner because there is not that sweet, loving relationship anymore, there is an offense, go to him privately and seek to work that out. Be of the same mind. And if he doesn't hear you, take another saint who is humble and godly and seek reconciliation. There is a process in which we are to go through when we are in such situations that are more than just petty issues. We must be long-suffering and not strive with others. Everything must be done in humility and motivated by love and for what's best for the other person.

Well, my last point here, number 12, there may be a situation when we have to leave a church. Some churches you can't stay in with a good conscience. When is it right to leave a church? Well, I'm going to say this: there is never a right to leave in discord. Even in leaving a church, we should do all that we can to maintain the bond of love. I know people leave churches all the time for the slightest reasons. No longer do Christians seek to maintain the unity of the Spirit and work out their differences but once they are offended, off they go. Once their feelings are hurt, it's hard to win them back. In fact, they will get their feelings hurt and it's usually about a year later before they leave or 6 months later but it's back when their feelings were hurt that causes them to just slowly slip away in their affections. They attend all the meetings and they are there outwardly but before you know it they quit coming on Wednesday. Slowly skipping fellowship events and then they break the news, "We're leaving." They don't deal with the issue. They have never dealt with the pain, the offense, biblically. And this is sowing discord among the saints. Leaving a church in an improper way is sinning.

If church membership includes being united to a spiritual family where our joys, trials and sorrows are mutually shared, then to depart from this family is to potentially place a tear within the body. There is not a pastor who is worth his salt that it doesn't break his heart when someone leaves the church. It's very painful. It's painful not just for the pastor and the leadership of the church, it's painful for the whole body. If our union with Christian brothers is connected with our union with Christ, then we must do all that we can to maintain that union. There is something wrong with our fellowship with Christ when our fellowship with the saints is broken. The Lord said clearly, "If you come to an altar with your gift but in your heart you have an offense with a brother or someone has done you wrong, don't give your gift to the Lord but lay it aside and go and get right with your brother because if you cannot," he says in another place, "forgive those who offended you, neither will your heavenly Father forgive you."

You see, it is vital that we seek to remain in unity and oneness with the saints of God. It may be a time for us in a clear conscience that we can't sit under the preaching because the preaching is not pure but we don't just leave, we work through the steps that God has given us. Go and privately and lovingly talk to your pastor. "Well, why aren't you preaching the truth here? This seems to be in error here." Talk to them. Counsel them. Ask them.

Secondly we see that it's unbiblical to leave a church without notice or explanation. Simply dropping out quietly may seem like the easy way out but this brings division within the unity of the church. How would you like if you had a close friend that just drops you? They just drop you. I had that happen to me. For years, I had a guy invest in my life. I invested in his life. I would consider at one time he may have been my closest friend and it was out of nowhere from my perspective, he resigns his church about 45 minutes away from our church. He resigns his church, moved. Did not give me a phone call of explanation. Did not give me a forward phone number. Did not share. He dropped his email. He just got up and left. I mean, almost your closest friend just leaves the area without telling you, without trying to contact with you and there is no way for me to

contact him. I tried to seek him out and I could not contact him. I'll tell you, it hurts. If we're a member of the body of Christ, it's not loving and if it's not loving, it's not biblical just to drop out of church. Sometimes you say, "I don't want to cause a rift. I didn't want to cause a problem. I'm just going to quietly slip out the back door because I don't want to cause any problems." That's what people think, right? But that's sin. That's not what's loving. You're bringing discord within the body of Christ.

If we leave a church without striving to do our best to keep the unity of the Spirit and leave with the blessing of the church to the best of our ability, I'm not saying that always possible but with all that lies within us, we are to seek to live peacefully. It's not always possible but we must do our best to live peacefully with all men especially the people of God. When we can no longer remain a member of a church in good conscience, if we have already sought to humbly resolve our concerns with the leadership of the church to no avail, then it may be permissible to leave but we should seek to leave in good standing with the blessing of the church. Isn't it a wonderful thing when people leave rightly? Not because they're bitter? I tell our people when they join and when it comes time to leave, you don't have to find fault with us to leave. Some people say, "Well, I can't leave until I find a list of things to complain about," and they've begin looking for it because they are ready to leave. I think leaving a church should be very slow. People shouldn't just leave churches very quickly. But there is a right way to leave because there is a right way in which we should seek to maintain this unity that God has given us.

In conclusion, we see here are at least 12 things and there are many, many other things that we could talk about but maintaining the unity of the Spirit is something that we must endeavor to do. It's our responsibility. It's a sin not to do so. We have a vested interest in one another. We must seek to grow together doctrinally, love those who are difficult, do not allow our hearts to pull away from the church inwardly, redirect gossip with words of grace, identify ourselves with the problems of the church, fill in the gaps, humble ourselves before God, submit to church discipline and do our best not to leave a church upset.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

*Lord, we are thankful for the unity you have given us. We are thankful for the unity that is present within this conference and the church here and it's a precious thing and we know you bought it with your own precious blood. We love it, dear Lord, because it is nourishing and comforting. Lord, it's a little taste of heaven when there won't be any discord, any selfishness, any pride, where the saints will love each other fully, completely, that unity will be that which resembles the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Thank you for this great unity. We pray that in our churches that we represent, that our churches would be known for the Gospel, for holiness and be known for our love for one another. This we pray in your Son's name. Amen.*