

Series: Hard Conversations	Reference: <i>John 17:20-21</i>	Title: Unity	Date: 12.29.2019
Website Writeup: We live in a polemic polarized world. As Christians, with Scriptural convictions & values, we need to learn how to speak in Love & Truth. Our unity is reflective of God & a witness to the world. Today we introduce 5 affirmations to help communicate well with others who may differ from us.			

COLOR CHANGES IN TEXT INDICATE SLIDE CHANGES

Memory Verse for this Series

Galatians 2:20

²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

“Never talk about religion or politics.” Classic bit of advice while sitting around Christmas dinner with extended family! Particularly relevant in our current cultural circumstance. Studies point to the increasing religious, political & social divides occurring around the world today.

The Internet enables us to live in echo chambers, hearing only opinions with which we already agree. Books, podcasts, news shows, internet sites - plenty to choose from. Many of them don't reflect the underlying intentions of people, they're just angry sound-bites. Some do have good intention, and some are misinformed & misdirected. Although, some have nefarious intention as well. But even they aren't beyond repentance & salvation.

Polarizing & adversarial conversations about difficult topics have impacted the church Jesus loves. And if Jesus loves the Church then we should do all we can to seek unity within it.

But divisions are very much alive in the church. Hot issues are the bane of pastors. I've had numerous conversations with pastors about how they strive to attain unity in their churches in such a hot climate as now. Friendships divided. Brothers & sisters in Christ, brought to vitriolic words without considering Jesus as our central unifying point. Some churches have real problems with congregants dividing into camps. The Vineyard isn't immune.

We've had churches bow out of the Vineyard over certain 'issues'. Thankfully that has been without any great upset which is a testimony to maturity. Churches who desire to deviate from biblical convictions on which Christianity has agreed for centuries. It's sometimes better to divide, but it should be on the authority of Scripture in major areas.

We've had people in the Vineyard say, *“I don't agree with the Vineyard on certain issues, but I'm just waiting for them to change & turn the corner.”* Which seems

underhanded & not conducive to unity. What we really should be asking is what does God's Word say about these things & come to agreement on the basis of Scripture despite our opinions on them. Although we admit, there are secondary issues of preference which sometimes create denominational differences, but they maturely can have fellowship with other churches despite these.

Sometimes religious zealotry can exacerbate division. Various groups claim to have the true grasp of the 'biblical' position. Think of the Westboro Baptist Church, a small church with a loud voice. Their methodology & attack of certain groups hasn't helped the mature communication of other churches.

Sometimes people twist the Bible to support their own political positions, or what they desire theology to say. People can be very prideful, thinking they can have a unique interpretation of Scripture outside orthodox Christian conviction.

Marcion in the 2nd century was one who decided he'd only accept certain books of the New Testament, none of the Old, and even then he'd interpret New Testament books differently. He decided the Creator God of the Old Testament was not the same as the Father who sent Jesus in the New Testament, and that Jesus had no humanity about him, but only looked to be so. Marcion led a great number of people astray. He set the church to task of cleaning up his heretical mess - which took many good people away from focus on evangelism, discipleship & care for the poor.

We struggle with certain questions right now. How should Christians vote? How ought we face questions about social issues, abortion, war, violence & inequality? What is the connection between faith & politics, between belief & lifestyle?

One question is, are we **reflecting or overcoming division**? In a cultural moment like this, the church is faced with a challenge. Do we reflect the divisions in our world, or do we challenge, transcend & overcome them? Do we run away from hard conversations, or do we believe in the uniting power of the Holy Spirit & God's word to help us find our way through them? Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17:20-21 points the way. Turn with me to p739 in your church Bibles. He's praying for the Disciples, but notice, also for us...
²⁰ *"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,* ²¹ *that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me & I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*

Notice, unity has to do with being 'in Christ', and thought is the defining factor of unity, how we think. So to think differently than Jesus is to be outside of Jesus, or outside community with the Trinity. It seems Jesus would believe the unity of the church serves two purposes.

First, it reflects the trinitarian nature of God in relationship. It demonstrates an aspect of who God is. None of us fully understands the concept of the Trinity, but we know there's community reflected in it. Our statement of faith reads: *We believe in ONE*

TRUE & LIVING GOD, eternally existing in three persons, equal in power & glory: the Father, the Son & the Holy Spirit. This triune God created all, upholds all & governs all.

Three persons of the Godhead working in unity for the same purposes. Trinity in Unity. Admittedly, there's no disagreement in that community, as three persons with one essence. And God's Word defines reality, Truth & life's direction.

This is why we believe the authority of Scripture to be the vital governing factor of life, faith & relationships. Turn with me to P814 in your church Bible to 2 Timothy 3:16–17 which speaks to this fact: ¹⁶*All Scripture is God-breathed & is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting & training in righteousness,* ¹⁷*so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.* This communicates Scriptures authority over us & our relationships - Scripture is the Christian standard.

We may not understand the Scriptures perfectly, or live them perfectly, but our limitations don't change what they are. Nor should it diminish our effort to strive towards understanding & reflecting God as we see Him in light of them. Most of our infighting & moral decline happen due to our drift from God's Word as authoritative. God's given us plenty to know how to live, and the Church has been in agreement on major issues concerning morality since the beginning. Current arguments are nothing new. They'll ebb away as they have in history past. Just read 1 & 2 Corinthians and its regard of the sexual ethic during that time for example.

Second, our unity witnesses to the world & inspires belief. No one wants to be a part of a community without unity. When a community doesn't know where it's going & why, or maintain its boundaries, it degenerates into hurtful practices. If it doesn't have guiding principles for the health & well being of its members, it's a lost cause. Life without boundaries, personal & communal, is one which promises freedom, but leads to slavery - a point currently lost on our culture. Scripture, the Holy Spirit & Church Community are like boundaries protecting us on our journey.

When the Church has it's focus on glorifying Jesus, being about His Mission, while governed by His Word & Spirit, it's at its healthiest & most powerful. Only then do all the issues fall into place under the guiding hand of God's Word & Spirit (Mt 6:33).

For instance, someone recently asked me, why am I a proponent of marrying young. I said, firstly, why put yourself in constant temptation. We believe as Christians - sex is reserved for marriage & to avoid even the hint of sexual immorality in life, because the sex act is representative of God & the Church. So, take the step to consummate a marriage in a way which reflects Christ's commitment & fidelity to the Church. Commitment first, since the sexual act represents & consummates full commitment, not the other way around. This simple truth would save so many from so much heartache! Since sex isn't only physical, it comes with an emotional spiritual attachment - sex is a theological endeavor reflecting God's relationship & fidelity to the Church. We were designed for commitment & fidelity.

Beyond that, the propensity for our culture to guide its young people to live for themselves & enjoy life on their own before being 'tied down' is detrimental to maturity & spiritual formation. It propagates an immature self-centered lifestyle. Christians reflect God. If presented with a suitable spouse, then we take the mature step to commit, being self-sacrificial to serve them until death. That produces character, the former just prolongs adolescence. Stepping up to responsibility in marriage does more for us than pursuing pleasure before we 'settle down'. True fulfillment comes in the pursuit of God & the reflection of Him to others.

The church needs to speak in unity on basic things like marriage. It's between a man & a woman only & consummation happens only after commitment is made before God & community. To do otherwise isn't reflective of the commitment & fidelity of Christ to His Bride, the Church. Somewhere along the way we began to think we could have belief, without it being tied to how we live. It would be harder to come up with a better summary of the central purpose of the church than to reflect God & encourage faith in Him.

This is **An Age-Old Struggle for the Church**. From the beginning, Jesus' prayer has proved to be wise. It's difficult for humans to reflect divine unity. In New Testament times, Jews & Gentiles struggled with how to connect the Jewish roots of Christianity to the broader social context.

The early church struggled with what it meant to be faithful in the midst of a pagan empire with its demands. As the church grew, questions arose about church authority, relations between church & state, or how to translate the gospel into different cultures. Conflicts produced situations in which obeying Jesus' commands was challenging.

This gives hope for the present. While the church has never handled conflict perfectly, it has continued to be a faithful witness of Jesus. Many divisions & conflicts are resolved, or put aside. We're not the first ones to face questions like these.

There's revisionist history going on about the church. Issues are attributed to the Church which are sometimes unfair, or wrong. At times, too much focus has been placed on some, who although proclaim to be Christ followers, act in ways which aren't reflective of Him. That focus has tainted the view of the Church, assuming all Christians agree with their egregious acts.

Let's be wise, not all who attend church & proclaim Jesus are of Jesus. Church should be a place for seekers, where people battling demons can come & be transformed. Their opinions & actions aren't always commiserate with Scriptural teaching. Some practice or believe things which aren't in line with Scripture which will change as people grow closer to Jesus.

Not to mention, Jesus himself warned, wheat & weeds grow together. Turn with me to p667 in your church Bible. Jesus deals with this issue in the parable He shares in Matthew 13:24–30: ²⁴Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like

a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵ But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶ When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. (know that wheat & weeds look very similar)

²⁷ “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ ²⁸ “ ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. “The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ²⁹ “ ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’ ”

He conveys here, mature Christians live with the tension of difficulty within the Body of Christ, given it sometimes does too much damage to weed out & confront every little issue. In other words, some within the church advocate for things contrary to a mature life in Christ. Our trust isn't in our own ability to weed those things out, although we do our best to lead people through them, rather we trust God to deal with issues Himself.

Sometimes there's just the problem of being simply misunderstood in discussion of issues. I've been blamed & maligned for things I never intended to communicate. Words can easily be twisted. It's difficult to communicate in an atmosphere of almost total distrust & fear, as is the climate of America now. Our words & intentions are sometimes twisted to mean something contrary to our convictions.

So, what's this series designed to do? This series is designed to help you as a Christian to have discerning effective conversations in love with those who think differently from you. But that's only possible if we have internal unity on primary issues & maturity on secondary ones.

The affirmations we'll explore over coming weeks will give guidance for how to love as Kingdom people good communication. The basic value of learning from others, particularly those who don't think like us, is a thread running through these sermons. We all want to learn how to have hard conversations in love, bringing thoughtful perspective to challenging topics. But how do we do it when emotions are high & values are challenged?

In a polarized, polemic world, the ability to have conversations which bring life to both parties will be increasingly important in years to come. Whether we're talking about politics, race, violence, religion, worldview, social issues, or justice, we can bring Jesus to the moment hopefully leading to life-changing interactions.

What resources does the Bible give for hard conversations? Over the next 5 weeks we'll ponder five scriptural themes which might help us to experience the unity Jesus prayed for us to have. We'll take one affirmation per week in the next five weeks.

Affirmation 1: God has all truth, but we don't have a perfect understanding of it - 1 Corinthians 13:12

Affirmation 2: Being loving is as important as being right - 1 Corinthians 13:2

Affirmation 3: The Spirit can create unity where once it seemed impossible - Acts 15:30-31

Affirmation 4: We can find our identity in Christ, not in our belief systems - Galatians 2:20

Affirmation 5: We choose to accept, we live in the already & not yet - John 4:23

Let's lead the way! Solid Christians need assurance of faith, reliability of the Scriptures & to learn how to communicate well. We live in America divided. We face some issues which can no longer be avoided. Our culture's struggling to find unity & coherence in the midst of a deeply divided world.

Let's show what life can be like when God's people find ways to go deeper, love harder & work longer for unity than anyone else. And in that same breath, let's remember we're here to proclaim Christ to a dying world. Christ has called us upwards into holiness & purity reflective of God's Trinity in Unity. Which all has impact on how we live & decisions we make - what we do with our bodies, our thoughts, money, time & talents. I hope this year we can delve farther into what it means to have our lives governed by His word & the leading of the Holy Spirit together in unity.

When we're confused, we pray, search the Scriptures & consult trusted resources. Trusted resources such as church leadership & others trusted voices such as authors or pastors from other trusted churches - but not just anyone, since there are some very misleading voices out there. Jesus has already prayed for us. May His Kingdom come & His will be done, here on earth as it is in heaven.