

United in Mind and Purpose

2nd Chronicles 30:12-22; 1st Corinthians 1:10-19



At the Baptist World Alliance congress, Rick Warren called for a new reformation, based on deeds, not creeds. He issued a call to rally around living faith in a united effort. Jimmy Carter issued a call to join forces around efforts to eradicate poverty. David Coffey reminded the congress that “Unity is a gospel imperative, and disunity is always a major hindrance to evangelism.”¹

When so many wonder about divisions plaguing churches and denominations, these calls to unity strike a prophetic chord. I have heard people asking, “Why can’t we just be Christian?” Disinterest in denominational identity may signal desire for unity that a plethora of denominations and churches does not afford. It may also signal that we are loathe to assume responsibility for working toward unity, casting the blame for division on that nebulous denominational structure in which we are not involved. What builds unity? How can we unite as the body of Christ Jesus without losing our distinctive traits as Baptists? What is our responsibility before Christ’s call to unity?

Passover had fallen into disregard. In the historical books of the Old Testament, we read of more than one occasion in which the practice is restored after generations of neglect. Under Hezekiah, the celebration was instituted once more, gathering Judah together to participate in reflection upon God’s gracious salvation in the Exodus. The Exodus from Egypt was the central salvation and revelation event for the Hebrews, as is the cross for us. Passover celebrated God’s salvation. God acted in grace to free the people with no regard to questions of merit, holiness, or sacrifice. They had cried out and *Yahweh* answered—salvation by grace.

Hezekiah proclaimed a celebration of the Passover as God had instructed they should do. This feast was designed to remind them of their identity and how God had reached down in grace to free them from oppression, slavery, and an empty existence. The people were to gather in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast as one body. They would eat it in individual homes, but the whole of the nation was to partake together, joining in celebration as one extended family that had received God’s grace. They were not all ritually pure, but they joined together with the purpose of remembering what God had done for them, rejoicing in divine care, guidance, and provision.

If Passover was central to Jewish faith as the focal celebration of the Exodus, it plays a large part in Paul’s thought as he writes to the believers in Corinth. We are not steeped enough in Passover tradition to notice the allusions to it throughout the letter. The believers in Corinth with Jewish backgrounds would have noticed the themes of cleansing the house, eating from the fellowship table, being the people of God, freedom to serve one another, and receiving divine grace. We should remember, however, that this is a corporate celebration of grace and equality before God—a big issue among the Corinthian believers.

Paul begins reminding the believers they lack no gift, knowledge, or speech. God’s grace was lavished upon the entire body to enable and prepare them for all that was needed. Jointly they were a

¹ Coffey, quoted in Ken Camp, “Coffey Elected BWA President; Others Lift up Evangelism, Justice.” ABP, 31 July 2005.
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complete body. Individually, they were drawn together to serve one another and the people around them as ministers of God's grace. There was a reason for this reminder of grace. Rather than joining together as a body, they were serving the purposes of those whose desire was dissension, discord, and division.

When Paul calls their hand on the discord among them, he does not treat it as a non-issue. This is no question to be brushed off as unimportant. If anything, this is a major theme of the letter. They were called into one fellowship on the basis of God's grace. They were to live in the shared fellowship under that grace. If salvation came through grace, there is no basis for exalting one or another on questions or merit or importance. They were gathered on God's merit alone.

Why was unity such a big issue? Hadn't Christ died for each of them individually? Is the gospel not a call for each person to accept Christ and live in faith before Christ alone? Rather, doesn't Paul say we were called into the fellowship of Jesus Christ as Lord? Such a fellowship is more than an individual benefit. It requires mutuality and a community bond of sharing, harmony, and unity.

Passover was a good expression of that common sense of belonging to God. Families had to gather with neighbors and friends in sufficient number to consume a whole lamb. Jerusalem would swell in population from 200,000 to over 1,000,000, as the nation gathered to celebrate. The ceremony required opening one's door to any with no place to share the celebration of being God's people. It celebrated the grace of God, before Whom no one had merit or prominence. As a people, they had been rescued from slavery to become the property of *Yahweh*. Freed to serve one another, they were enabled to let go of pettiness, uniting under what God had done for them as a people.

Indeed, the Corinthian believers had major problems—immorality, selfishness, arrogance, and the acceptance of pagan influences. Paul seems most concerned, however, with unity. That is the point at which he calls them to set aside their differences and draw together under the grace of Christ Jesus. Paul deals with these issues, but from the standpoint that they detract from the unity of the body. There was little problem in following the teachings of Paul, Apollos, or Cephas, except when that detracted from corporately representing Christ.

The church factions were built on determining the wisest of the leaders in faith. Unity had been split over the leader each group claimed to follow. Paul was not proud of a Corinthian faction in his honor. He was concerned that they were rallying around personalities instead of the grace of Jesus. Their claims as to the wisdom of the leaders they follow are nothing more than folly in Paul's eyes. Factions gave prominence to issues other than God's grace revealed in Christ Jesus. They were focused on building up their own sense of importance, rather than rallying under the grace of Christ Jesus.

Paul calls the believers to be united in the same mind and the same purpose—that of Christ Jesus. We can only unite effectively around something that takes precedence over all other aspects of our lives. We can only unite as we allow service to Christ to find reflection in our daily actions. We can only unite as we invest energy and effort into following unity as a gospel imperative. Unity requires a singular, shared purpose that is larger than individuality. The mind and purpose of Christ must become primary over all other issues. Will we submit to His purpose? To do so requires that we place God's purposes ahead of our own comfort, security, and personal advantage. To others, it may seem folly. To Paul, it is the compelling essence of the gospel—laying all else aside in unity with Christ Jesus alone.

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