

Putting the You in Church Unity

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Well, this is a great day. Every Sunday is a great day in my opinion, always a great day to gather together with the people of Truth Community Church to open God's word, to sing the praises of Christ and from time to time, from month to month, to be able to have our choir minister to us as you all did so wonderfully. Thank you for that. My heart is overflowing with gratitude to God for everything that is happening in our church. It's really wonderful when you step back and look at it. You know, as you go from week to week, it's possible to just kind of get so caught up with the flow of what's happening that you miss the bigger picture of what's going on. And as I look out on this wonderful congregation, meaning you, as I look out on the wonderful brothers and sisters in Christ that I have the privilege of going through life together and I look at our church and look at what's happened over the past year or two in particular, there is so much boundless reason for gratitude.

Just think about it in terms of what's happening in our church and the life of our body. There are dozens that are serving in music as you just saw, some stepping forward for the first time singing and doing such a wonderful job. We have men, many many men, who serve in communion and who serve in our worship watch to make sure that there is good security as we gather together and that no one comes in to cause trouble. Up in the crowd's nest we have people who serve in audiovisual. We have others serving in our friends ministry greeting guests and those in need. Others have hosted events for us. We have ladies serving in the nursery on a consistent basis. And all of this people doing just from the glad overflow of their heart, glad to be a part of the church, glad to have a place to serve, glad to be able to do what they can, sometimes in low profile areas and other times with a little bit more public recognition, but all of that being part of what makes our church work and what brings us together as we serve Christ together, to say nothing about the elders that I have the privilege of serving with who would not want me to say any more than that along with the fact that we now have seven men that we have recognized as deacons who are serving and leading. There is so much good that is happening. I hope you see that. And that doesn't even get to the individual ways that you are growing in Christ and you manifest a love for the word and a growth in understanding and a growth in the likeness of your life to conform to the image of Christ and to become more like him. We are just overflowing. We are blessed beyond measure here.

What I love about our church and what I love about you, is our church is marked by, in my opinion, I won't say my humble opinion, that's kind of self-defeating, isn't it? In my

humble opinion, but in my opinion our church is marked by people of the sweetest most tender kinds of spirit. You know, when I have friends that come from out of town, I love for them to interact with you because they get a taste of what I get to enjoy as your pastor as a measure of my life. So I'm very very grateful to God today as I stand before you, grateful to God for me to be able to do what I do, grateful to God that he has brought such a fine congregation into Truth Community Church. What a blessing. What a blessing that is and I say that without any hesitation or qualification. I love this church and I love you and I speak for the other elders when I say that. I am very very filled to overjoying today.

Two weeks ago the elders had a meeting with the deacons, just a regularly scheduled time of meeting, kind of reporting and looking forward in the life of our church, and at that time, I had some things to share with the men that I really didn't think would go beyond that meeting. But I spoke with them about some principles to cultivate the life of our church, how we can go from a position of strength and advance and grow still more, to help these men who are serving in such faithful ways and leading in such a peaceful way, to help them see that there is opportunity for them to expand into a consciousness of the spiritual aspect of ministry, not just the tasks that they do. I was so greatly encouraged by the way that they responded to that and received that and men saying, "Man, I see opportunity to grow here. This is an opportunity for me to grow still more." And the enthusiasm and excitement of that was really encouraging to me.

So what did I do? Hey, when you find material that people respond to, you use it again, you share it with others, and so at our open elders' meeting this past Wednesday, I shared the same material. I spoke on the things that I had spoken to the deacons about and it was the same kind of response. The number of people that were just locked in listening to me, leaning forward. You know what it's like, if something is interesting to you or compelling to you, you lean forward, you physically lean into it because it's engaging you. And I shared the similar things that I had shared with the deacons, the same kind of response. So what happened? Well, I had some men, including our elders, who came to me and said, "Don, you need to share this with the whole church. This is important. This is edifying for everybody. Everybody needs to hear this, not just a few men or not just the circle of people who came to the open elders' meeting. Share this with the whole church." So it's my joyful privilege this morning to do that, in a sense, to obey my fellow elders and to also represent them with the things that I'm about to share with you.

It is a joy, beloved, it is a joy to share things that I know will promote the well-being of the flock that we all love. I believe this to be true of all of you who are members of our church, I believe this to be true of those of you who are associated with our church but not yet members, and I believe that you earnestly desire the well-being of our flock; that you share the kinds of feelings that I just described, you share that about our church. You love our church too, that's why you come week after week, that's why you joined, that's why you went through the detailed process to become members of our church, it's because you care about it too. So we are able to speak this morning from a spirit of strength and unity with what we're about to say and I know that you're going to receive it well also.

And what this gives us an opportunity to do and what I've been speaking about to the deacons at our open elders' meeting and now what I bring to you today, is the topic of church unity and this is a wonderful topic to be able to address when you are in a position like our church is when there is harmony that marks the life of our body and there is harmony between each other. And what we need to do is to just consider this and to lay out before you something that the deacons embrace, that the men that were at open elders' meeting embraced, and to just give you an opportunity for you to see as our deacons spoke, to realize that, "Ah, there is opportunity for me to help contribute, deepen and protect that which I find precious," because I know that you all find this precious too. Like I say, that's why you're here.

So what we're doing here today is we're saying as we are all in this together, as we're all enjoying this together, how is it, what do we do, how is it that we can protect this so that it stays like this as much as possible going forward. How is it that we can cultivate this and look to strengthen this first and foremost to the glory of our Christ, the one Lord who died for his one church. How is it that we can protect this so that we can personally continue to enjoy the fruit of it. And how is it that we can cultivate that for people who are yet to come into our church; that they would enter into a body that is unlike what other churches have been perhaps in their past experience where there is unity, where there is love, where there is harmony, where there is a prevailing absence of conflict. How can we do that for them.

As I mentioned in our open elders' meeting this past Friday, roughly speaking we have about 160 adults and 80 children, 18 and under, that are affiliated with our church. I love all of the ratios that are involved in this. I won't bore you with the statistics of it but how is it, thinking of those of you with families, how is it that we can preserve this so that as you are raising your family in the midst of this, that they can have the most healthy manifestation, the most healthy church experience possible? Wouldn't we want that? Wouldn't you want that to be true of those that you love, that they would know this and that as others come in, that there would just be an echoing resounding testimony about Truth Community Church, that that's a place where Christians love one another, that's a place where I can go and flourish spiritually? Well, the Lord has established for his church to be unified and when we are in a position of strength like we are to be able to talk about it today, we are able to look at this and say, "Okay, now we are in a position where we can be proactive in this. We can look forward and say what do we do going forward so that we guard and protect what the Lord has given us." And the title that I have given today's message is this "Putting the You in Church Unity." Putting the you in church unity. What is your role? What can you do? What should your thinking be so that you are a positive contributor to this wonderful unity that we enjoy?

Here's the thing, beloved, unity doesn't just happen. We have to be mindful and proactive to protect it. We have to be individually committed to be instruments of unity and also to be protectors of unity with what we do. This is so important what I'm about to say: you see, especially in a church like ours, a church of our size, a church of comparative intimacy, our church is so much more than simply gathering together for a Sunday

morning performance and then we go out and go our separate ways. Anyone that has been a part of our church for any length of time knows that there are relationships that are deeply embedded in our church, that relationships among brothers and sisters in Christ are deeply important and are a feature of what we do and what our life is, really. Well, how is it that we guard and protect those relationships because we come in and we live life together, we share a life together, we simply don't come in and share in a performance and then everybody goes their separate ways not to see each other again until the following Sunday? That's not New Testament church and that's certainly not what we have here at Truth Community.

So what we're going to look at today are four principles about the nature of church unity that I want to lay out for you and what I want to ask you to do, beloved, is this: I want to ask you to embrace these deeply in your heart, to cherish these things, to recognize that the things that we love about our church are things that are worth protecting and defending and to realize that it's not a given that it would always be that way if we are not careful to protect it. So it's with this proactive forward-looking sense that I share these things with you, that we would all become individual agents, if you will, individuals that are individually in our mindset, in our words and in our actions, contributing to the greater corporate good, the greater corporate unity of which we all benefit. Everybody that's a true Christian should want that. I'm perfectly confident with everyone in here, I know that in one way or another I'm expressing that which would be precious to you as well because we are all on the same page as we approach this.

So, how can we think about church unity from a biblical perspective? Well, if you want a more direct expositional treatment of it you could go to our messages on Ephesians and look for a message I preached on Ephesians 4:2-3 that dealt with that text in context, and we can do it this way, this is a little bit more of a biblical survey of the topic. So, first of all, what do we look at? What do we consider? Well, first of all, we need to see the priority of church unity. The priority of church unity. As you read the New Testament and you are alerted to the presence of this issue, you find it in virtually every letter of the Apostle Paul in one way or another addressing the unity of the church either from a doctrinal perspective or from a relational perspective or sometimes with a combination of it. And as you're going to see in the Scriptures that we're going to look at all too quickly this morning, beloved, it would be very difficult to overestimate or overemphasize the importance of church unity to Scripture which is another way of saying it would be very difficult to overemphasize the importance of this to Christ. Christ died to save a people and Jesus said, "You are my friends if you do what I command you." He said, "They will know you are Christians by your love for one another." The corporate testimony of a church hinges on the love of the people within that church for one another and that love lends itself to unity. It's hard for a church that's at war and conflict with each other to have anything to say constructive to anyone anywhere about love, certainly the love of God and the love of Christ. How is there a testimony to the love of Christ when people are gathered in his name and they don't love one another?

Well, I thank God that we're not in that position here today in Truth Community but, you see, here's the thing and one of the things that you do in leadership is that your leadership

is never just about today. Leadership is always about looking down the road. Leadership is like defensive driving and you're looking and you're saying, "What could cause an accident down the road?" It's not that the car is in any danger right now but you're just alert and mindful of things that might come into the roadway and cause an accident down the road. Well, here today we are saying this is what we can do to protect that which we love and cherish. This is what we do. This is the mindset. This is a day-by-day approach to living within the body of Christ that honors Christ, that honors his sacrifice on the cross for sinners, that honors the redemptive life that he has given to us.

So let me just say this and to kind of reset: it's hard to overestimate the importance of this topic to the Scripture and to the life that we share together. I know, I know, oh, I know from the depth of my heart that you love your church. I know that. You tell me that. It's evident in the way that you live together. Here's the thing, beloved, and as we're talking about church unity: I'm not sure that you realize – and this is a very positive statement – I'm not sure that you realize the vital role that you individually play in protecting and building that unity and that's my responsibility to help you see that so that you can gear your life in this direction. Your role is vital. It's not simply the job of elders to protect church unity, although that certainly is one of our primary responsibilities. But this is something that we all participate in. This is something that we all have a role to play in and that's what I want to show you and it starts with understanding the priority of church unity. Scripture says again and again and again that we are to be one in spirit, of one mind, of one intent, one in unity of life and purpose.

Let me just show you a handful of scriptures for each of these things that we're going to talk about this morning. Turn to 1 Corinthians 1. All we're looking at here this morning is for you to see the priority and the emphasis that Scripture gives to this. 1 Corinthians 1. As you recognize the priority that it is to God, as you want to love and follow Christ in your life and grow spiritually, then you adopt the same mindset toward issues that he has. And Paul, writing as an apostle of Jesus Christ, writing to a church that was different from ours in the sense that it had multiplied problems that it was dealing with, Paul opens up his letter after his introductory words, he says in chapter 1, verse 9, he says, "God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." That's what it means to be a Christian. God has called you into fellowship with Christ. As a Christian, you are in union, perfect union with the Lord Jesus Christ; with his Spirit dwelling within you; with his merit providing the righteousness that is necessary for you to approach God; with his shed blood having washed away all of your sins. And now sharing a common life with Christ, you look and you see, "God has called me into fellowship with Christ. I am in a position of immense blessing being and belonging to him." Well, when God truly saves someone, he doesn't just save them and leave them as a silo in isolation in a spiritual cornfield someplace, he brings us into a body together. He brings us in with others that he has also saved that we would share in this life together, that we would serve Christ together, we would serve and love one another together and be a reflection, be a manifestation that the work that he did in your heart, the work that he did in mine, the work that he did in someone else, there is an underlying unity to that that is expressed in our different lives and the different giftedness that we bring to it.

So having been called into fellowship like that, Paul says in chapter 1, verse 10 of 1 Corinthians, he says, "Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment." This is the opening premise of this entire long letter to the church at Corinth. "I want you all to agree. No divisions. Be made complete. Same mind, same judgment." There is this oneness of mind, this oneness of purpose, this oneness of devotion to Christ. There is this singularity of judgment that Paul wants to mark the church.

With that in mind, turn over to Ephesians 4 that I alluded to earlier. You can think about this topic as being that which builds a fence around the spirit of the church. Unity is a protecting wall around the life of a church and Paul in chapter 4, verse 1 of Ephesians, after explaining the whole breadth of salvation says, "Therefore in light of the salvation that you have received," it's the same kind of connection that we saw in 1 Corinthians 1, he said, "Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called." You are a Christian, he says, and now I implore you, I exhort you, I beg you with apostolic authority, I call upon you to walk in a manner that's worthy of what's been given to you by God.

And what does that worthy walk look like? Is it about external rituals and going through motions? No, it's all about matters of heart and relationship within the body of Christ. He says, "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Beloved, that is a command that is not simply written to leaders of the church. That is a command that is written to all of those who would name the name of Christ. This is a command that applies to all of you individually, that you would be men and women, boys and girls who belong to Christ, that you would be those who recognize the strategic priority of church unity and that you would be conscious and dedicated and intentional about preserving it. Christ has already given us unity with the nature of salvation, now it is ours to preserve that unity and not to become agents that would inject disunity, disharmony and dissension into the body. This goes to the very way that we live. This flavors every interaction that we have within the church.

Look over at Philippians, the next book over from Ephesians, in Philippians 2. Actually, go to chapter 1, verse 27 because this is crucial for setting the context. Again, Paul goes from the general statement of the blessing of being in Christ and the reality of it and to say, "Now walk in a manner that is worthy of that," and then he gets specific and goes to the issue of unity. In chapter 1, verse 27, he says, "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." He says to be a true Christian means that you are to have a pattern of life that is worthy of what Christ has done; that there should be a correspondence between the nature of your life and the Gospel that saved you, that your life should be worthy of that.

And where does he go? Having set forth that general principle, look at chapter 2, verse 1, he says, "Therefore," in light of what I've said about walking in a manner worthy of the Gospel, "Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of

love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose." There is not room for dissension in that. A body of Christ, a local assembly, is to be marked by a unity, but a commonality of intent and purpose and love that is flavored with a gracious interaction with one another that tinges all of our relationships with each other.

Beloved, that's why this church is sweet for you to come. That's why you're never in a hurry to leave, it's because you find that there is a sweetness in your interactions with one another that makes you want to stay. Your heart is drawn to that. You want to be a part of that and you enjoy it. Well, the reason you enjoy it is because there is unity there. You know, when there is conflict, people run from conflict. People don't stick around when they are not united. When you are united, this is what happens. So the fact that we can never close the building – I know I joke about that a lot and I don't want you guys to change – the fact that we can never close the building after a service is an indication of what's happening and it is sweet and it's precious and to be protected because it's a priority.

One more, Colossians, the next book over, Colossians 3. You can just kind of go book by book through Paul's letters and find this theme being spoken of, a point that I emphasize just to say that it is so prominent in church life. Colossians 3, beginning in verse 12. Again, you see the tie of God's work in salvation issuing out in a life of unity in the church. Colossians 3:12, "So, as those who have been chosen of God," there it is, "holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity." A gracious forgiving spirit toward one another. A gracious humility, a gentleness that would mark relationships, that would mark your heart. Do you know what happens? When you have an individual who has a humble gentle heart in response to the way that Christ has saved them and you start to join that individual with other individuals who see it from the same perspective and then all of a sudden there is humility and gentleness and a forgiving spirit that marks the life of a group that way, energized by the Holy Spirit, all coming together under the Lordship of Christ in appreciation for his saving work, all sharing the indwelling Holy Spirit. Unity is to be the product of that. So we are all mindful of the fact that there are places that are contentious and we look at Scripture and say that's not the priority. Something is wrong about a church that is known for its contention when the obvious biblical priority is on unity, oneness of mind, gentleness, love for each other, forgiving one another. This is a priority.

You see, we start there, we start with that aspect of it in our treatment of it simply to do this: you won't know to make this a priority unless you are persuaded from Scripture that it's a priority. And as we look at Scripture which is God's word, which is the word of Christ, and we have Christ speaking to his church through his apostle unity, unity, unity, unity in response to salvation, then we say, "Oh, this is a priority." In other words, it's something for you to take seriously. It's something for you to pay attention to. If it's

important to Christ, then as a Christian it's important to you, right? So this is a priority to Christ and here we are living in our lives in our realm of history and we say, "Okay, it's a priority to me too."

Now, how important is this priority to Christ? Well, we can put it this way in our second point this morning: you can measure it by the fact that there is a protection of church unity. A protection of church unity. We won't spend much time on this because this aspect is not the point of today's message but church unity is so critical that God in his word has provided a means to protect it. There is a positive call to church unity which we love and respect and for tenderhearted believers is all that needs to be said, but Scripture, one of the things that I love about the Bible is, it's realistic. Scripture realizes that not all will share in that commitment to unity; that as a church grows and expands, as people go through different chapters of life, there will be times where disunity bubbles up to the surface.

What do we do then? That's a pretty important question. If it's such a priority in order to maintain the peace, should we step back and be quiet about it? Should we hold our tongue when we see a divisive person starting to take root in a church? Should we just step back and in the name of unity give them room? Well, let me ask you a question: if you knew, some of you are going through this, if you knew that you had a malignant cancer in your body, would you say, "Well, I'm going to keep the healthy part of my body away from that and just leave that cancer alone"? No one does that. Everybody understands that if you have treatable cancer, that you deal with it. You remove it or you undergo chemo that would put it out so that it can't harm the rest of the body and spread its destructive influence elsewhere. We understand that from a physical standpoint that you don't let disease spread, and when it comes to church unity, Scripture has provided the means to protect the unity.

Look over at Titus 3, if you would. This is also a passage that I preached on in the past. You can go to our website and find the message that deals with Titus 3 in four or five messages and find a more specific treatment of the verses that I'm going to look at. Let's start at verse 8, again, flowing from the nature of salvation, a principle of salvation stated and then unity flowing from that, the importance of unity flowing from it. Or you could go all the way back to Titus 1:1, but let's not do that. Let's just be content to go back to verse 7. Paul says, "being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life." We are justified by grace, we are heirs of eternal life, we belong to Christ and now we are within a body. What do we do with that? Verse 8, "This is a trustworthy statement; and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God," there it is, "those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds. These things are good and profitable for men."

But now there is a more negative statement made. It's not simply the positive presentations of church unity but there is a negative statement made. Here's what you do when that is threatened. Verse 9, "avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law, for they are unprofitable and worthless." Verse 10, what happens if someone won't abide by that? Oh boy, this starts to get weighty. Verse 10,

"Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned." How important is church unity? This important: that when someone becomes factious, divisive, dissenting in a church and they start to spread that, you deal with it. You go and you warn them. You say, "Do you know what, brother, do you know what, sister? Your behavior, your words, your actions, your attitudes are inconsistent with church unity. You are creating a separation. You are dividing people against each other with your conduct. We are warning you to stop." Not because anybody is trying to control anybody, it's because this is a priority to Christ and this is his church. Oh, I just said something very very important: the church is Christ's. It belongs to him. It's not ours to make of it what we want. It's not ours to say, "Well, we won't have a unified church. We'll have open forums and we'll have a theological free-for-all." No. No, not in the name of Christ you won't because this is his church and what Christ says is that the church should be unified.

So under his authority and following his command and his example, you go and say, "Brother, sister, no. You can't be this way here. That's not appropriate." And you give it time and if it continues, you go a second time and give them a second warning, "Stop. We are serious. You cannot be this way in this body. Stop. We are warning you. We're calling you. We're concerned for what you're doing. We're concerned for your soul, not just the impact of what's happening." First and second warning, echoes of Matthew 18. And if the person persists, you come to a point where you reject them. You put them out of the church. You expel them. You discipline them and say, "No, this cannot go on. We have warned you. We've warned you again. Under Scripture, we are putting you out in light of your refusal to change." That, beloved, is how serious church unity is to Christ. So much so that he has given provision to the church saying, "This is how you deal with it." You can measure – watch this – you can measure the importance of the priority not only by the number of times Paul emphasizes it in his letters, you can also measure it by the fact that there is a corrective measure included to Scripture when that principle of unity is being violated.

And what does that look like if it got to that? We would ask God that it would never come to this. It is never the first option or the second option but it is the final option. If someone is divisive like that and refuses correction, refuses warning, you make a public statement. "Bill Jones," had to think quickly to make sure I wasn't using a name that is actually on our membership roll. This is an example not related to anything. "Bill Jones, beloved, has shown himself to be a factious man and it grieves us. We have talked to him about it on multiple occasions. We know that some of you have talked to Bill about his words and his conduct and he hasn't listened to you either, and it saddens us but in faithfulness to Christ under Titus 3, we are putting Bill out of the church. We are expelling him from membership because this cannot go on. Church unity is too important." That's how important unity is. You measure the importance of unity by the fact that Scripture emphasizes it repeatedly, repeatedly, repeatedly. I say this so many times: you know, God only has to say something once for it to be important. The Bible only has to say something one time for it to be worthy of our full attention, devotion and obedience. If it says it again and again and again, then it starts to sink in, "Wow, this is really serious. This is really important, to be honored."

Beloved, here's the thing: you're just like I am, most of you, none of us enjoy conflict. None of us want to be in the center of a discussion where somebody is being corrected for their sinful lifestyle. None of us enjoy that. None of us look for it. I greatly prefer the conversations of peace and affirmation that mark my life as a pastor at Truth Community Church. That's much much better. It's much more pleasant. But, you see the goal for us, the goal for us as elders, the goal for you as Christians, the primary goal is not to have a pleasant unconflicted her life, the goal for us is to be faithful, to protect the charge, to protect the stewardship that has been given to us. And if pleasantness flows from faithfulness, great, that's a double blessing. If faithfulness means that it brings conflict for a time to address a problem, okay. The fact that I find it unpleasant doesn't matter. The way that I feel about it is absolutely irrelevant. What matters is the duty of fidelity to the Lord who suffered and bled and died and rose again for my salvation. That is the priority. Fidelity, loyalty, faithfulness to him is what matters and if faithfulness leads me into conflict and sleepless nights, so be it. I must protect that which Christ has called a priority in his church.

Now, beloved, when it comes to these matters and to the extent that it would ever accelerate to something like that, into a level of church discipline, there comes a point where the elders bear the ultimate responsibility for that. The elders bear the responsibility when it gets to a certain point where it is the responsibility of the elders to do that, God does not expect new Christians to have to bear the weight of this kind of thing when you are approaching the point of a public expulsion from membership. So the elders, those who are charged with the oversight of the church, they are the ultimate responsibility for this. So I would want you to know where the weight of the matter lies and Scripture is clear about that. But here's the thing, beloved: you do have a part in it. You do have a contribution to make in church unity. It's not primarily in that confrontational sad situation that Titus 3 addresses but you have a part. You have a blessed privilege to be a contributing factor into the love and unity of a church in your life and in your circle of relationships.

Let's go to a third point here today to talk about the perils to church unity. The perils to church unity. We've talked about the priority, we've talked about the protection of church unity, well, what are the perils to church unity? What would jeopardize it? What would threaten it? What would undermine it? You know, as I was preparing this message, I thought about something and I said, "Is that really true?" Yeah, that's really true. "Is this a good illustration?" Illustrations are always a little bit tricky because you never know exactly where they're going to go but do you know what? Here's the truth of the matter, you probably wouldn't think about it this way but it would be far better, it would be far less lethal if somebody lined up a cannon across Mt. Carmel Tobasco Road and literally fired cannonballs into our structure in order to tear the structure down physically. That would be far preferable than seeing division enter into a church like ours. You can rebuild the walls, you can fix the damage, you can submit an insurance claim and get back to business, but when a church is fractured by dissension, when a church is fractured by disunity, when members are biting and fighting with one another or undermining the credibility of the church with things that they say, beloved, that's far more destructive

than any cannonball could ever be because the church is a spiritual organism, not a physical one. The church is not about the building, it's about the people, and when you undermine relationships within the body of Christ, you are firing spiritual cannonballs at that for which Christ died. No one should want to be in that position. Every one of us should fear drifting into that and every one of us should be careful in wanting to protect that from happening within our body, right? Isn't that true? If this is precious and important to Christ, then it is precious and important to us.

Well, what are the perils to church unity? What are the threats to church unity? And beloved, with all of the compassion and love for you that I can possibly muster, let me say this and in total sympathy for every one of you in here because we have a church full of tenderhearted people just like you: when you are tenderhearted, you are vulnerable to misjudging a situation; you are vulnerable to think wrongly, especially in a church that is enjoying unity like ours is. Here's the thing that's hard and difficult to accept when you are tenderhearted like that: the threats to church unity come from within. They come from within. You know, if a flaming atheist stood outside and criticized our church, you wouldn't pay any attention to him. You wouldn't care what an atheist is saying. "You don't have any part of this." You would just walk right in and brush it off. What's harder to accept is the clear biblical reality that the threats to unity come from within.

Look over at Acts 20. This was a great burden on the heart of the Apostle Paul. Acts 20, the threats to church unity come from within. Acts 20:28, Paul is speaking to the elders at Ephesus and he says with an importance that carries on and extends to church life today, he says, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." Beloved, do you see it again? A statement of salvation and then he flows into a discussion of unity.

He says in verse 29, "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and," verse 30, "from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert." Speaking to the elders he says from within the threat will come. Yeah, there might be men that come from outside but understand there will be a threat from within. And when the threat starts to manifest from within, your reaction, your natural, loving, gentle disposition is going to be, "Oh, I can't be seeing what I think I'm seeing. It must be me because I wouldn't believe that about them." Now, to a certain level, that's a healthy attitude to have but you have to realize that you cannot turn off discernment simply because you are within the walls of a church. Dissension comes from within. Termites attack from within, inside the building, not outside. Termites attack inside the wood and wreak their havoc. So we have to be sensitive to, we have to be alert to the possibility of, beloved, we have to be prepared for the reality that from time to time there may be threats to church unity from within from people that are even a part of our body.

Now, God forbid that it would ever be one of you. Make your first response to that be, "O God, may it never be true of me! May I never be the Judas among the 12." But we recognize Scripture says from within. I have more Scriptures to share with you on this in

just a moment but, beloved, I would want you to know that it is not just false teaching that will harm a church, Satan gladly uses gossip and criticism and innuendo to undermine the peace. And we just have to be aware of what's being said by us and to us and around us to recognize that the tongue, as James said, is a fire and the tongue can set a lot of things on fire. One little tongue can set a big world of fire just like if you go to areas that are in the desert, forests and all of that, it doesn't take a massive blow torch to start a destructive wildfire, somebody can be playing with matches, not paying attention to their little campfire, and what looked little at the time suddenly blossomed into something much greater. Beloved, you must think about these issues from that kind of perspective.

Look over at Romans 16, if you will. Romans 16:17, a verse easy to overlook as normally contemplating the realities in the first eight chapters. But in Romans 16, here it is it again though, beloved. I just realized this. I just thought about it. In the book of Romans, Paul talks about salvation from a great systematic perspective and where does he end the book on? What flows out of that in the book? This discussion in verse 17 of Romans 16. He says, "Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting." The words can sound like butter, oh, smooth.

And what divisive people do, they never go straight to the elders. They never do that. They never go to the strong men of the church in order to ply their wares. They go to people who are unsuspecting. They go to people maybe who are alone, or people who are struggling, and like a wolf picking off a sheep from the flock separate, isolate and deal with them. That's the tactic. The unsuspecting, the innocent – oh beloved, and I say this to protect everyone in this room – the tenderhearted, the soft-spoken ones, those become the targets for this. It's an easy pick. You know, whether they think this way or not, "You're soft-spoken, I know you won't speak back to me." Paul says, "You watch out for people like that and you turn away from them. Don't give them a platform. Don't give them an audience. Don't let them do that."

And in verse 19, Paul apparently felt like the church at Rome like I feel about you. He said, "the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you but," he says to them, "I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil." We have to be wise about these things and recognize that not everybody shares the same commitment to unity that we do, and when that happens and when that manifests itself, you turn away. You act to protect that.

One last verse in Philippians, going back to Philippians. You remember how Paul called them to be of the same mind, intent on one purpose. In Philippians 2, in verse 12, "So then, my beloved," you get the point, you already see it, I don't need to comment on this connection any longer. "So then, my beloved," Philippians 2:12, "So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in

you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." What should I do in light of the work of God in salvation in my heart, Paul? Verse 14, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing." Have a unifying influence. Don't be divisive. Don't be a complainer.

Well, what does that look like? And here, beloved, we're going to get practical. I laid out most of the Scripture that I want you to see. How is it that you can be someone who protects a church against the perils against church unity? What is it that you listen to in private conversations? Listen for things like this, "You know, I have a concern." What do you mean you have a concern? "Do you know what the elders did?" What? No, what? "I don't like what's been happening lately, do you?" A leading question to draw you into the discontent. "I think someone's hiding something." What? Really? When you start to hear whispers like that, beloved, the red siren lights of discernment should start going off in your mind and say something not good is going on here. Whispers of discontent like that are like fingernails on the blackboard. I've never imitated that before. Wow, I think I have a second career ahead of me.

Watch out for those whispers of discontent, beloved, and don't make room for them which leads us to the fourth point, kind of all the practical outworkings of it: the promotion of church unity. How can you promote church unity? How can you advance it? How can you cultivate it in your sphere of relationships? I'll give you just a moment to catch your breath and catch up with me here. We have talked about the priority of church unity, looked at a number of passages. We looked at how Scripture provides for the protection of church unity in Titus 3. We've looked at the sad difficult reality that the perils to church unity often come from within. What do you do, then, as a member of Truth Community Church who loves your church and wants to perpetuate the unity that you're enjoying in it? You have a role to play, beloved, and it is a vital one. Frankly, it's one that I can't play. This is where you can do something that I cannot.

One of the things that I said to the deacons, repeated it at the elders' meeting is this and everything that I'm about to say is okay. What I'm about to say is just a recognition of reality, it's not a criticism of anyone or anything. The truth of the matter is, this is surprising to some people, the truth of the matter is that you'll be more candid and honest with each other than you will be with the pastor or with an elder. You'll let your guard down a little more with people who are around you either to talk honestly about what you're feeling or what your concerns are, and that's fine. That's part of relationships in a body of Christ. Don't stop doing that. All I want you to see in that is that when you are on the front lines and more easily see and hear what people are really thinking, you're in a better position to deal with something that's amiss than I am, than another elder is, because it doesn't come to us as quickly as it comes to you. In another context, Winston Churchill said, he said, "A lie can get halfway around the world before the truth gets its pants on." So it is with divisive words and conduct in a church. It can spread like wildfire before the elders have any idea what's going on. You're in a position of being in a watchtower. You're in a position of being the one who can look out and protect when you see it starting to happen and there are things for you to do in order to protect the unity of the church.

Here are a couple of things. On the positive side, beloved, be mindful about your relationships within the church from this perspective: be quick and be verbal in your affirmation of other people. Before you walk out, find somebody in the choir and say, "Man, that piece was beautiful. Thank you for serving. Thank you for giving your time in that." And it was great. Find a deacon, find somebody you know that they are doing an area of service. Go back to the nursery and thank them and say, "Yeah, I just want to thank you for what you're doing," and affirm them. When you see somebody walking courageously through a trial, when you see a young family keeping their kids in order and bringing their families, their young children to church week after week after week with such faithfulness as we have so many doing this, go and tell them, "Do you know what? I see that. You're doing a great job." You encourage them. That cultivates unity from a positive standpoint. Pray regularly and diligently for your church. Pray regularly and diligently for each other to preserve the unity. Pray for your elders if it comes to your attention that we are dealing with the underbelly of something like this.

But here's the real thing, the real opportunity for you. Let me state it as a question: how should you deal with critics? How should you deal with it when somebody comes to you and starts to bring negative statements about your church or undermining the credibility of your leadership? How should you do that? How should you think about that? Let me clarify one thing here. When we talk about this, we are not talking at all about people who are discouraged in life and are talking and working through disappointment in their own personal circumstances. Those are people that we encourage. Those are people we come and put our arms around, "Yeah, I know your spouse is a pain to live with." Nobody should say that to Nancy. Don't do that. "I know the hardship that you're going through and I'm praying for you." We're not talking about people like that. These are the people that we love and encourage and we build one another up. What we're talking about are people who are fault finders within the body.

What do we do with that? Let me give you a couple of passages. First of all, turn over to Proverbs 18. It is high time that I point this verse out to a flock for which I have responsibility. Shame on me for not doing it sooner. Keep in mind that the mere fact that somebody says something doesn't mean it's true. In fact, you shouldn't even regard it that way. Proverbs 18:17, "The first to plead his case seems right, Until another comes and examines him." If you hear a fault finder, you immediately take it all with a grain of salt. You remind yourself, "I don't know the full story here. I don't know what this person is up to. I don't know what their motivations may be but they are saying things that are inconsistent with my knowledge and experience of the truth and I'm not just going to take it at face value." This is part of the difficulty of being within a body and you want to believe the best about everybody and just assume that everybody is always telling the truth about everything that they would ever say. Well, don't be unbiblical in your approach to that gentle heart. When a fault finder comes, you've got to do in your mind, "Okay, I'm only hearing one side and I'm sure there is more to this story than what I'm being told."

Secondly, when it comes to leadership in particular, this is a place where you can say things that it's very very difficult and awkward for an elder to say what I'm about to point

out to you and it will be obvious to you why I'm saying this and why I frame it that way. Scripture calls upon church members to respond with respect and submission to their leadership. This is not a Pastor Don priority, this is a biblical priority. Hebrews 13 couldn't be any more clear about this. Look at verse 7, he says, "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith." There is an attitude of respect and the writer of Hebrews goes on in verse 17, states it even more strongly and says, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account." Here's what I want you to see: that verse is not simply about submission within the body of Christ. Look at what that says about those that have leadership responsibility: they will give an account. They will answer to Christ. Beloved, as a friend I ask you to realize that your elders feel the weight of that deeply. We go through life recognizing that at our end is an account for the souls that were under our charge and that Christ is going to deal with that seriously. And elsewhere in the book of James it says, "If you've been a teacher, you'll face a stricter judgment." That's what's ahead for elders in a church. Here's what's coming for us: strict judgment from a holy omniscient Christ saying, "How did you handle my people?"

Well, beloved, I would ask you to let that kindle in your heart some measure of prayerful sympathy for your leadership, to realize that the weight is heavy. I mean, I'm glad to do what I do, don't misunderstand me. This is a joy, privilege, it's the reason I was made to be doing what I'm doing and I'm glad to be able to do it with you and for you, but understand that Scripture, there is a corresponding responsibility that Scripture speaks to those that are within the church that says, "Be mindful of how you're interacting, how you're speaking about your leaders."

"Let them do this," look at verse 17 again, "Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you." So how does that apply to you? I'm not hitting you with this verse, I'm equipping you. How should you respond when things like this come up in your life and you see these things starting to happen?

One more passage, look over at 1 Timothy. One of the blessed things, one of the blessed balances of Scripture is that it places this heavy responsibility on leadership but it also provides protection for them within the life of the body and we all need to hear this and heed this. In 1 Timothy 5:17 it says, "The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching." I didn't make that up. I didn't say it. God said it 2,000 years before I was born. Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing, the laborer is worthy of his wages." Then it goes on in verse 19 and says, "Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses." We all have a biblical responsibility. This goes to formal proceedings at a leadership level, it also goes in your own individual lives. We all have a responsibility to reject and refuse accusations against church leaders that come in a private whispered conversation in a corner of a church. You do not have biblical permission to entertain those things. This is from God. This is not church policy. This is biblical. Don't do that, it says.

So, beloved, having said those things, let me show you how to work it out, how to handle it if it comes up for you. Understand this: it is not ministry for you to give a platform to someone to air their repeated grievances. That's not ministry, that's giving them a platform to do what Scripture says they ought not to do. So, beloved, guard yourself against misplaced sympathy. People who are disruptive and divisive like this will disrupt your peace, first of all, and then they'll do this, this is the tactic, this is the way it always goes with whispers: they will by implication or by direct statement bind your conscience with expectations of confidentiality for their gossip. "Don't tell anybody I said this." Now they have put you in a position where you know something unbiblical and divisive is going on but they tell you not to talk about it and they wrap their hands around your throat and say, "Don't talk about it." Don't let them do that. They have no biblical expectation of confidentiality when they are violating Scripture in what they say and in what they do and with their patterns and attitudes. Speak up before they lead you into sin and before they hurt the unity of the church.

Charles Spurgeon said this, he said, "Do what we may, Judas will come in, but let us not invite him. Let us not make it easy for a betrayer of Christ to be comfortable with us." And the truth of the matter is that there is very easy, pleasant, joyful ways for you to do this that I'm going to give you as I close. You don't have to make a big confrontation out of it. You don't have to say, "Wait, you're being a divisive person here! Stop it!" You don't have to do any of that. I wouldn't expect you to do that. I wouldn't lay that on you to do. But there are some very simple things that you can do that are even more effective. Scripture says in Proverbs 15, "A gentle answer turns away wrath." Say these kinds of things with gentle joy, "Do you know what? I'm actually happy with our church." That will chill a conversation real quick. Here's another one, "Have you spoken with an elder about your concern?" "Well, no." "Well, then why are you telling me? I'm not part of the problem and I can't solve it either. So why are you telling me, friend?" The honest answer to that question is always no, they haven't. And if perhaps someone says yes, "Yeah, I have talked to..." "You mean to tell me that if we go over and talk to Andrew right now that Andrew will agree you have spoken with him? Let's go. Come on, let's go." "Whoa, I, I, my roast is in the oven." "Oh really? That's what I thought." I'm happy with our church. Have you spoken with an elder about your concern?" And beloved, if after some gentle statements like that said in a spirit of love from your gracious tender hearts they don't respect the boundary, refuse the future conversations. Don't listen to it anymore. This is how we contain it.

If somebody – we can all relate to this – if somebody was coming up to you and they had a runny nose and they are just obviously sick and they just start coughing all over you, you would ask them to cover their mouth. You would turn away so that those physical germs weren't belched out all over you, wouldn't you? That's what we all do. That's a natural instinct. "Are you kidding, this is gross!" Beloved, recognize spiritual coughing when you see it and say the same thing. "Friend, please cover your mouth. You're spreading germs. This isn't healthy. Don't do this." Show them your notes from today's message.

So, beloved, we consider all of these things with our eye on Christ. Why do we do this? It's because Jesus Christ has saved us. It's because Christ has brought us into a body. It's because Christ is so wonderful and good. And we realize the church belongs to him and as a grateful response to being a sliver, a part of that, we want to contribute to the health of what he died for, what he deems precious, what he will have with him as his bride forever and ever. And as we do these things, as we guard these priorities, we remember that he loved us and gave himself up for us. We remember that he will build his church. We remember that he promised to be with us even into the end of the age. So, beloved, all of this today has been about what I'm about to say: in light of all that Christ has done for us, embrace your role in making our dear church pleasing to our dear Christ.

Father, help us to that end, we pray. Thank you for the sweet spirit of this body and may you take and sanctify us through the spoken word that we have heard this day. For the name and for the glory of Christ, we gladly pray. Amen.

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