



repentance, confession and forgiveness can remove this evil from the roots and bring healing. In the course of time, disunity has become a "**stronghold**", a wall of negative reasoning, where some elements of truth have become mixed with untruths, prejudices and caricatures. But fortunately, strongholds can be broken down again, as our weapons are spiritual and "mighty in God" (1 Cor. 10:4). Disunity can be described as one of the **spiritual giants** amongst the "rulers, authorities and powers of this dark world" (Eph. 6:12) that try to undermine God's Kingdom. Whoever has "seen" the devastating effects of disunity cannot help being overcome by a holy anger against this work of darkness. There is an urgent need for **giant killers!**

Unity is hard work! Unity is a **choice** that we **actively** need to pursue - something that has to be **worked towards!** We need to break these walls down with our own hands, because it is with these same hands that they were built! On the other hand, unity is **100% God's work:** only He can bring about a godly level of unity in our hearts.

Therefore, first and foremost, we need to pray, but in that prayer we are in the best possible company (that of Jesus!) and so we have the assurance that our prayer will indeed be heard.

Unity is not so much something we need to seek, but something we need to **preserve:** as Christians we have remarkably much in common (one body, one Spirit..., one God and Father: Eph. 4:1-3). How difficult can it be to be united if we focus on these things instead of on the small things that we differ over?

The first battle we often have to deal with concerning unity is **within**

**ourselves,** in our own **divided hearts,** against inner division. This is a lifelong battle in itself! But the secret to having an undivided heart is to first **unite it with Jesus.** Then we can grow towards unity with those around us.

Unity finds success or failure in **our thoughts** and in **our conversations.** We are accomplices to division if, for example, we listen to gossip about other churches or Christians, and take pleasure in the fact that things are not going too well for them; if we don't confront this gossip or stand against it; or if we judge and criticize...

Disunity is often the result of being hurt by other believers. If that is the case, it is our duty to bring this before God, and to allow Him **to heal us.** If we don't take care of ourselves (or let someone take care of us) then festering wounds will develop, causing pain and communication breakdown for generations to come.

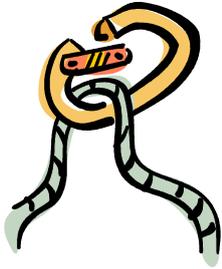
There are many misconceptions concerning unity. Some think that you have to agree about everything in order to be united. But that isn't true: even in a marriage that isn't the case! Trying to build unity on agreement of doctrines is like building the **tower of Babel:** it leads to a Babel-like confusion and things only get worse.

This misconception is due to a **Greek mindset** that crept into the Church, which tries to force everything into nice, neat boxes, thinking in terms of abstract formulas and religious dogmas. Paul writes, "the letter kills". Furthermore, theological debates are never purely "intellectual", but mostly interwoven within the context of power struggles, and the search for recognition and esteem. It would be intellectually more honest to acknowledge these underlying irrational issues. Unity primarily has to do with love, and only secondarily with reason. It's all **about the heart rather than the head.** Why do we find it so difficult to sit at the same table as a brother with a (slightly or widely) different interpretation of the Bible to us, when Jesus commands us to love even our enemies?

If we examine how the **early Christians** solved a theological conflict, then the account in **Acts 15:1-21** (the Apostolic Council concerning circumcision) is a textbook example, from which sound principles can be learnt about how we should deal with such things. Christian unity is so much **more than just tolerating each other:** "I leave him alone, and he leaves me alone" is at best an absence of hostility. We can only really speak of



unity when we enjoy being in the other's company and have their wellbeing and growth at heart. To love someone doesn't mean that you have to like everything about them and agree with them in everything! Deep unity is only attainable once you have a relationship **on a spiritual level**: when you can look at the other person according to the spirit instead of according to the flesh (2 Cor. 5:16) or the soul. If you can see "**Christ in them**", then you can see God's image in them, their godly destiny.



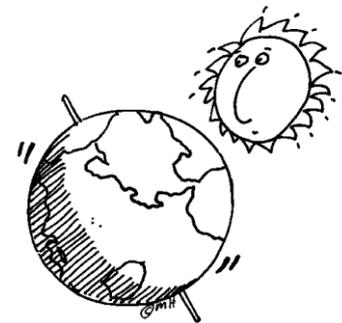
We see a very powerful form of such unity in a covenant: two (or more) people "**bind**" themselves to each other and promise to remain faithful to each other through thick and thin. This can be compared to two mountain climbers linked together by their carabiners on a single rope. Their fates are literally joined together: the one can save the life of the other, but can just as easily pull the other into disaster! The clearest example, of course, is that of marriage. The truth is that all Christians are already in covenant with each other – whether they want to be or not, whether they like it or not – as all believers are in the same

covenant with Jesus.

There exists a certain code of honour between soldiers who go into battle together: they are prepared **to go through a fire together** and will never leave a buddy behind. When a church is lead by a **team of leaders**, then this team will exhibit a far greater dynamic if its members have connected themselves to each other in a similar way.

T.E.A.M.: "Together Each Achieves More"

We can, as Christians, try to bring about unity in the wrong way, which only results in promoting disunity. Jesus warns in Matt. 12:30 that "**he who does not gather with me scatters.**" It requires godly wisdom and patience, and is not to be undertaken lightly. True unity can only be built when Jesus takes the central place, and we place our opinions, our ministries, organisations and ourselves at His feet, submitting all to Him. Disunity can easily occur when the healthy care of the shepherd (the pastor of a church) for his sheep becomes distorted to a "**spirit of control**", where "he lords it over the flock" (1 Pet. 5:3). Even denominations build **protecting walls** around churches and bring unity to the like-minded; but when these walls become too high, they actually cause division (in respect to other groups) rather than unity, and fail in their purpose. They can harden into impenetrable fortresses that become **prisons** for those inside them. When we allow our relationships with other believers to be **led by fear** rather than love, or through **distrust** rather than trust, we are no longer thinking as God intended. Unity is more noticeable if you look beyond the mundane things and see the bigger picture; look at the long term, **the bigger, eternal perspective**, rather than focussing on immediate success (sometimes at the expense of others). In this sense, we all need a **Copernican revolution**: God's kingdom isn't centred around me, my church, my ministry or my denomination, but all churches, ministries... are centred around God. Only His plan counts, only His honour matters, only His perspective is the correct one! Each one of us needs to exercise this sort of "**kingdom thinking**", where we get God's vision for His church into our system. We have the tendency as human beings to quickly become complacent with existing (broken) situations and to put up with them, saying "that's just the way it is". But if we no longer believe in the impossible, and no longer pursue God's standards, then everything remains the same as before.



Division is a **problem that arises out of comfort and opulence**:

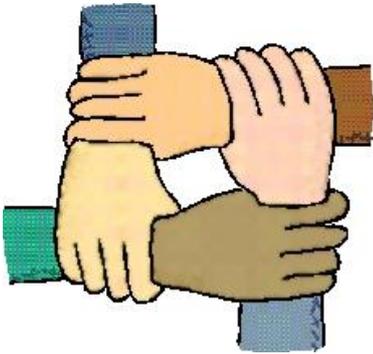
in times of war, you can't afford to be squabbling over minor issues. When **persecution** increases in the end times, all Christians and churches will need each other. It is far better for us to become united voluntarily than the "hard way" (forced through persecution). Our unity must also be of good quality: If it is built on a weak foundation, then it will not be able to resist the "shaking of all things" (Heb. 12:26). Fellowships where real love is evident shall be

We are sentenced to unity!

unmistakable witnesses in a world that is becoming more and more **individualistic** and disconnected. Churches are called to be **rare islands of warmth** in a cold, chilly society. When we call each other "brothers and sisters" then this should be more than pious talk. If we are one big family, then the best way of making our Father happy is by all coming together in a **big family reunion** at least a few times a year! The party will be truly complete for Him when no one is missing.

God commanded the Israelites to come together in Jerusalem **three times a year** to celebrate the great feasts. All twelve tribes came together and strengthened their bonds of fellowship with each other.

Unity is an absolute **prerequisite for revival**. With the miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5:1-11), it was impossible for one single boat to haul in the catch. A divided church is like **a fishing net full of holes**; you might well be catching fish on one side but they're escaping on the other. If the five-fold ministry (evangelist, pastor, teacher, prophet and apostle) is not working together properly in a church then much fruit will be lost.



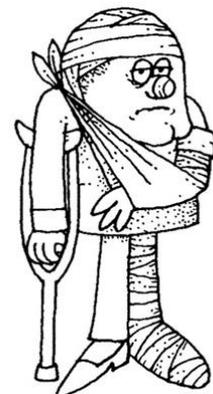
Unity between Christians from **different nationalities** is another chapter. Getting on with a brother or sister from another country, from another ethnic background, or another continent can sometimes be quite a challenge. Do we judge others by their outward appearance, by their skin colour or I.D. card, or do we see their heart, their inner being, and the same love for God that we have in common? Are you strongly patriotic, with a sense of superiority, or do you suffer from a sense of low self worth? Where is my true identity? How much value do we give to our **heavenly citizenship**? When believers choose to be Christians (citizens of God's kingdom) first, and then Belgian, American, Congolese ... then

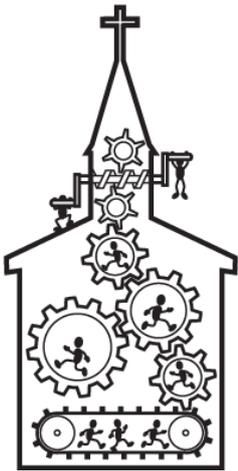
relationships develop very differently. Jesus "has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility... to create in himself one new man out of the two" (Eph. 2:14-15). If he could do that then between Jews and Greeks, between slaves and free, then isn't he able to do the same today between the Flemish and the Walloon, Belgians and Africans etc.? Furthermore, the church will be God's chosen instrument to manifest His **"manifold wisdom"** (Eph. 3:10) to a world that wrestles with many forms of nationalism and racism. Jesus got on well with everybody: the Roman centurion, the Canaanite woman, the Samaritan, a prostitute, the high priest, a zealot, a tax collector... Jesus was a man without walls and **didn't put people into boxes**.

Only relating to people with a similar background to oneself leads to **spiritual inbreeding**, which eventually leads to **weakened** believers and churches. The best remedy against this is to regularly read books, attend conferences, talk openly and work together with believers from different Christian traditions: this results in **genetic enrichment**! Each church family has certain gifts and talents that are stronger than in other churches, and it is good if we can share these.

In Matthew 18:19, Jesus promises a 'blank cheque' for answered prayers, when those prayers are brought in agreement. In the Greek, the word "agreement" is "**symphoneo**", which means: "to agree or be in harmony with". From this we get the English word "symphony", which is another wonderful example that speaks of unity. A magnificent performance of a symphony is the result of a meticulous process where many different instruments and voices come together to form one harmonious whole to the glory of God.

Paul's comparison of **the body and its members** (1 Cor. 12) teaches us that we cannot be properly connected to the head if we are not properly connected to the other parts of the body. The reality is that many believers do not know their place in the body, or are not prepared to take their place, or simply refuse to be connected with this or that believer... In short, such a body is seriously handicapped in many areas and functions at a mere 10-20-30...% of its full potential.





A modern parable would be to compare the church to an **"assembled car or aeroplane"**: Each individual part by itself is useless and cannot do anything. It is only when they are all brought together, each in its proper place and connected to its surrounding parts, that they form a powerful vehicle that actually works.

Working together is also simply a matter of **common sense** that is more often seen in the economic world. Companies are **fusing together**, banks and building societies are taking each other over – because they realise that this is the only way to maintain their share of the market. They are not motivated to do this out of mutual love for each other, but out of **well-understood self-interest**. Shouldn't we as Christians be even more motivated towards this, knowing how important it is to our God?

Unity between churches can be compared to **town planning**. If a town or city has no urban development plan, or no rules regarding urbanisation (or the rules are simply ignored!), then a hideous city emerges: a **mixed-up mess** of styles and materials that clash with each other. In God's kingdom there can and should be space for expressing creativity, originality and variety, but there is **a minimum level of respect for each other** and for the church as a whole that needs to be maintained. What is the motivating factor for planting a new church in a city? Is it purely for the glory of God, love for the lost and the growth of God's kingdom? Or is there sometimes a hint of *"envy and rivalry.... and selfish ambition"* (Phil. 1:15-17)? In a certain city in South America, there existed a good functioning **"city church"**, that is, a platform made up from all the Christian leaders of the city. When a new church planter arrived in the city, he was invited to their meeting. He expected a hostile welcome and a barrage of critical questions: "Aren't there enough churches in our city yet? Why are you coming to fish in our pond?" ... But instead, he was given a warm welcome, they prayed for him together, he was thanked and given lots of useful advice. So, this response is possible!



In order to build unity between churches you need to **step out of your comfort zone**, leave behind what's familiar, and learn to operate in **another "church language"**, with another form of spirituality, culture, style... that is not so much "better" or "worse", but simply "different".

Unity is dependent on **how "open" our heart is**. That's why Paul writes to the Corinthians, *"We opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. ... — open wide your hearts also."* (2 Cor. 6:12-13). Sometimes internal renovations are needed.

If we call other believers our "brothers and sisters", then we have a responsibility to look out for them: we truly are **"our brother's keeper"** (Gen. 4:9). **Indifference**, not showing an interest in the other, is sometimes more deadly in a relationship than hate itself.

**Divisions** and church splits are often caused by much more than just theological differences. Under the surface there are many (partly subconscious) psychological issues at work: personal hurts, unresolved issues and wounds from our own youth, negative experiences with certain believers which have made us "allergic" to similar people. And in our theological debates, are we attacking a **caricature** – a (heavily) exaggerated and one-sided description that we have formulated ourselves?

A church split is in many ways **like a messy divorce**: If there are monumental conflicts, then the basic rules of communication go out the window. Why is it that mediating **between believers is often more difficult**





than with those from the world? Do we sometimes expect too much from one another? Do we forget to extend grace to the other, the same grace that we so desperately need?

Or is it because we too easily equate our own opinions with biblical truth, considering them to be infallible?

In certain situations a **split is unavoidable**, but the question needs to be asked whether *all* (!) other means have first been exhausted. Every church split should be accompanied by deep

sorrow for Jesus' body, love, gentleness and honest self-examination.

Of course there are texts in the Bible that warn about **false teachers**, but the problem is that these texts are given far more weight in some Christian circles than the texts that exhort us to be united. In theological discussions about true and false teaching the question always arises as to where the boundary should lie between the essential and non-essential points of faith. Can anyone say for certain **exactly** where it lies? Don't we run the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater?

The **name** we give to our church can also reflect an element of judgement or division: many names of churches came into being as a reaction against another church (e.g. "Full Gospel Church"). A great measure of **grace and discretion** (seeing oneself in a right perspective) is needed to lubricate the wheels of the machine to keep everything running smoothly. "*Esteem the other higher than yourself*" is a golden rule to guard against pride.

If we have an unresolved conflict with someone Jesus strongly advises us to **resolve it amicably** on the way to the courthouse (Matt. 5:23-26), because once it comes to a lawsuit, the implications will be far greater!

To admit we were wrong, to take the first step in reconciliation, to confess our pride, to ask for forgiveness ... they're not our favourite activities. Although it doesn't seem pleasant at the time (and is quite **painful to our "flesh"**), looking back it is very liberating. But the irritations of working together with other Christians work together for good (Rom. 8:28): in fact, they're actually essential for our spiritual growth, for the "**shaping**" of our character and the "forming" of the new man.

*"As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another. (Prov. 27:17)*

Passionate, highly motivated leaders can lead many people to a higher level, but their drivenness can also be dangerous if holy zeal for God becomes contaminated with human passion. Such "**unauthorized fire**", selfish ambition, is the biggest enemy to unity in God's kingdom: it leads to competition, rivalry, and people building their own kingdoms. Disunity is also a consequence of an **individualistic mindset**: many Western believers need to be set free from this narrow, individualistic thinking of our time, and to discover God's heart for **collective** bodies (tribes, cities, peoples), as so often portrayed in the Bible. The Great Commission isn't so much about saving "souls", but about making disciples of the *nations* (Matt. 28:19), to see a country transformed by the Word of God: to bring in God's kingdom, so that His laws are respected, in that country as they are in heaven. For such a "collective commission", **collective authority** and unity is needed.

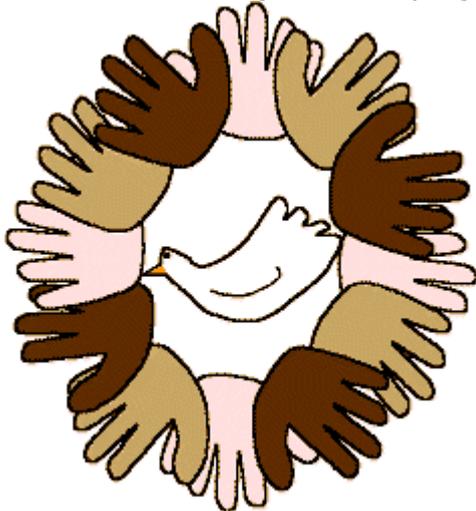


This is the idea behind a "**city church**": all the churches in that city learning to function as one church, speaking and praying with one voice. Such city churches can, for example, organise a city-wide evangelistic campaign which simply cannot be ignored by the city, and start a combined social ministry to the city that would be much stronger and more effective than ten small projects, or a combined 24hr prayer or worship meeting, etc. The reality is that the infrastructure of the church is built up in a totally different way: the churches are generally firstly grouped together according to

denominational or theological streams. Most churches have a stronger link with a sister

church (from the same denomination) 100km away than with a neighbouring church in the same street.

As long as each church and denomination remain focussed on their own work, we act like the people in **the time of the Judges** in the Old Testament: "*In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.*" (Judges 21:25). Because there was no central authority, each of the twelve tribes lived for itself, and didn't see the need to help another tribe if it came under attack. This "**tribal mentality**" (tribalism) weakens national unity. An apostle, at a national level, can possess the authority needed to call the tribes together and purge the enemy from the land.



Unity among Christians is always linked to a living Person, never to a (dead) principle: there is **no true unity outside of Christ**, because He is "the Truth". For this reason it is impossible to have unity if we are not **filled**, inspired and led **by the same Spirit**. That's why it is more difficult to be united with a believer who loves his church (and all her trusted traditions) more than he loves Jesus. Jesus said, "**Blessed are the peacemakers**": those who bring people together, who build bridges, extend a hand of friendship, strive for unity, and are actively involved in bringing about reconciliation... They are of a rare calibre, because it requires a lot of humility, gentleness, patience and perseverance: it demands faith and love from God Himself.

Unity is needed at all levels: local, regional and certainly at **a national level**: this is as important as in a **national army**. If each unit functions independently by itself, ignoring other units and the national headquarters, then no great battles will ever be won. Churches that think, "What's the point of working together?" could look at this another way: "How can we bless our sister churches?" Unity among Christians gives an **enormous strengthening power** to their witness and prayer: The rule  $1 + 1 = 2$  doesn't apply here, but: "*Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand*" (Leviticus 26:8). There is a **spiritual dynamic** behind a deep unity from the heart that sets specific heavenly principles into action, the force of which we have experienced far too little.

Unity certainly costs us a lot, but division costs us much more!

Unity makes a group invincible: even at the tower of Babel, God said: "*nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them*" (Gen. 11:6). If that was the case when they were plotting together for evil, how much more does it apply today if we are united for good! To work on unity, we sometimes have to begin on a **very practical** level. It is much easier than we think: we can all take small steps in this, for example by inviting the pastor of a neighbouring church for a cup of coffee, inviting him as guest speaker, or by regularly praying together, giving an **encouraging word**, showing genuine interest, demonstrating servanthood. If the theological gap is too wide, then a joint social or practical project can help to build a bridge. Sometimes we need to be prepared to put aside our own local programs for the sake of regional initiatives.

**The Heavenly Bride** (the Church) in Revelation 21 is radiant, full of God's glory, and spotless: even the relationships will be of a superior unearthly quality. In every Christian soul there should be a **deep yearning** to have such heavenly unity with all believers! It is our destiny and that is what we were created for! This is no empty dream or idle utopia: God's Word clearly promises that this supernatural unity will eventually come! God's intention is that the present church should be seen as a **fellowship of the future**, a prototype, a model for the world, a foretaste of heaven, a part of God's kingdom that is already a reality on earth. If we look at the church today with our "human glasses", we see division, cracks and tears. But even now, through His divine eyes, with glasses of infinite faith, God sees the true, eternal reality, the glorious end result: a **Bride without "stain or wrinkle or any other blemish"** (Ephesians 5:27).

