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English Comp. 1

18 September 2020

Unity

Today in our Conservative Anabaptist churches we can appear unified and yet there are people within the church who are not unified in their hearts. What does true unity look like?

There are two different aspects of unity: outward unity and heart unity. Although unity is evident externally, it is more than just acting, talking, and looking the same. To promote true unity we need to focus on the heart level of unity, made possible by a common vision.

Conservative Anabaptists have a lot of things in common across all denominations, things like a good work ethic, simple lifestyles, close families, and a practical view of the Bible. We may disagree in application, but we agree on principles like nonresistance, nonconformity, or unity. But unity can be misleading because we can look unified when we really are not. If someone were to walk into our churches, they might be surprised to see that almost everyone is dressed the same way. If they were to come for a few Sundays in a row they would probably discover that most things happen the same as they did last Sunday. A different person might be leading songs but we would still sing three songs to start the service. There might be a different preacher but he would start and stop at the same time as last week. These practices are not wrong in themselves. After all, the Bible says to do things decently and in order. Services run more smoothly when people know what to expect.

But doing something the same way every Sunday, dressing the same as others, and talking about the same things as everyone else is not necessarily unity. Unity is not identical parts all moving down an assembly line. Unity is unique parts coming together as a unit and working together smoothly for the common good of the unit. Not one part can do the work of two. Each fits perfectly at the exact place where it belongs. Two parts might look the same but they still have different roles. Most, however, have unique shapes and designs.

One could compare unity to the human body as Paul did in talking about the church, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1Cor. 12:12,13). He also recognized that each member has his part to do: “But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be?” (vs. 18,19). The Bible makes it clear that we should not try to all be the same. We are unique for a reason: to create a body where each member brings his or her strengths together into a single unit, functioning for the glory of God the Father.

Although we Anabaptists have a general understanding of the concept of unity, sometimes we emphasize outward unity and neglect the unity of the heart. We hear sermons preached from 1 Corinthians 12 and understand each member has a gift to offer the church. We are glad when people bring unique skills and abilities to our community, but we like when that happens in a certain pattern and within a certain boundary. People are taught to act, say, and do all the right things (outward unity). Not that there is a class one must attend; it is more like an unwritten expectation, making some people hide behind the mask of outward unity. If we are not diligent in hearing each other’s hearts, we can appear unified but inside we have no idea why we

are doing the things we are doing. Some even leave Anabaptism altogether because their hearts were never united with the church.

It is possible, however, for a church to stress outward unity and still have “heart unity.” There are lots of members who truly have the same vision as their church. Some might even say growing up with outward unity helped them foster heart unity. Praise God for that. But let’s be careful that we do not stress outward unity to the point where as long as everyone looks unified we don’t go any deeper and get to the heart level. There could be someone in our church who has all the right answers memorized but in his heart he is confused. We do not want to miss these brothers and sisters.

We should not underemphasize outward unity, however. If our hearts are united, there will be outward unity as well. James says, “That faith without works is dead.” Even so outward unity without heart unity is dead. It’s about where our focus is. 1 Sam. 16:7b says, “For the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.” If we can learn to see people like God does, we will focus on the heart first and when they feel like their hearts are cared for, it will motivate them to take up the same vision Jesus had for the church. Proverbs 4:23 makes this point very clear, “Keep your heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.”

So how can we foster unity of the heart? For unity to be present we all need to have the same vision. If we do not have a common vision, one person’s heart will lead him this way and another person’s will direct him that way. This means we all need to form our own vision, a vision shaped by the Word of God. Get into the Word and ask God what his vision is for the church. If someone is not sure why they do the things they do, they should feel like they have the

freedom to wrestle with questions about their faith. Mature Christians should come alongside them and not feel threatened by their questions. Often when someone is forced to wrestle with difficult questions honestly, they start to form their own vision. They no longer need to rely on others telling them what and how to do things. They too have a vision and live that out from their heart.

Once we all have the same vision there will be unity. It will not only be an outward appearance of unity but people's hearts will be united as they journey toward that common vision. I hope that that vision would be to become more like Jesus and then to spread the Gospel and help others in their journey of becoming little Christs.