

Interrelation and Interdependence of the New Testament Church

Contributed by Mike Fontenot
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Unity - John 17:20-21 - "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

The great desire of Jesus for His church was and is unity. Words and expectations of Jesus for unity in His church however, and the historical reality of church history are miles apart. This is not a debatable interpretation of doctrine or history, but a stark fact lamented by all.

We know clearly what Jesus says in John 17, written as his earthly farewell address, his last teaching before his arrest in the Gospel of John. It is, also, written in a Gospel almost all place as the last written Gospel in the New Testament. Written, I believe, both historically and redactively to meet Jesus' awareness of the future and the church's experiences even to that point in history. Is "Unity" meant to be no more than an ideal with no binding application or expectation? As Jesus say in John 17:23, is our lack of unity (complete unity as the text says, *teteleiwme÷noi eiÜß e⁰n*) the real reason our mission efforts have slowed down). This disruption goes back further than 2003 in our brief history. Were the cracks of unity already seen in unhealthy competition, isolation, and unresolved conflicts? Will we settle for little "a" autonomy rather the unity directed and described by Jesus?

How do the influences of our cultures and our sinful natures affect our view on the questions of unity and interaction? Unfortunately there are other words that practically seem to influence even more than unity - words such as: independence, self-determination, liberty, sovereignty, autonomy, self-rule, self-determination, self-government, and self-sufficiency. In some of our historical cultures, these words have the weight of sacred tenets that have shaped our history and drawn our blood in battle. And it is no small task to separate ourselves from our historical cultures.

Independence - "freedom from dependence on or control by another person, organization, or state." These can be literally be "fighting words." They also seem to be the thoughts in the Garden of Eden towards God at the fall of mankind. These parts of our sinful nature get morphed into cultural values and spiritualized in our churches as doctrines. Not everyone who has ecclesiastical reservations concerning structures that tie us together operate from a sinful motivation. But we all need to recognize our common human tendencies and cultures. People can and do have sincere convictions, yet at the same time our sinful nature and personality traits can be camouflaged by genuine theological concerns. Unity is not easy!

In matters of our own personal family, we are rightly alarmed of any structure that threatens our right to function as "family unit." This genuine ordained protective nature, translates into a broader areas of cultures, states, and regions. But is the church one family, or is it just a multitudes of families joined by a common head, Jesus? Is there one body of Christ, or numerous bodies of Christ? Is there a combination of these concepts?

Although some of the "body" passages in the NT - I Cor. 12, Eph. 4, Romans 12 have application locally, do they have any application beyond the local church?

Practically speaking there is not doubt of our influence on one another. But are there theological issues that we must face? Let's consider three points.

- I. New Testament Evidence of both independence and interdependence
- II. Historical Issues
- III. Practical Applications and Suggestions

I. New Testament Evidence Part I

Connecting Ligaments

Eph. 4 : 11 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 12 to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. 14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

There seems to be general agreement that Ephesians is not an epistle written to one specific congregation, but more likely to the group of churches in Asia Minor. The word "Ephesus" in 1:2 is not in some of our best early manuscripts (The earliest and most important MSS omit "in Ephesus" (∏46 Å° B° 6 1739 [McionT,E])). There are very little personal references in the letter, an unlikely event since Paul spent the most time there of all his efforts (compare Romans where we know he has never been and see his list of greetings in chapter 16). There is also the practice of Paul writing letters to that particular region that he intended to be passed among the churches (Col. 4:16 After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.).

From these scriptures what are some general principles:

- Certain spiritual gifts are used to equip and unite the saints. Apostles/Prophets (scripture), evangelists, pastor-teachers are gifts that are meant to help the church reach the unity in the faith and maturity. They are meant to be connecting ligaments that bind the church together throughout regions and the world. Either those gifts are being used for unity, or by their same power they are being used to keep people apart. Either evangelists and elders/teachers are working at connecting churches, or they are working at keeping churches at a distance. We have seen this in our history. Most members have a great desire to be connected. It was true in the New Testament Church as well. Paul's relationship with even churches that he planted was often undermined by new leaders who came in and turned the church away from its founding father, Gal. 1:6-7, II Cor.(almost the whole letter). III John 9 describes the disruption when a leader separates the church from outside leadership(it wasn't just Paul's problem).

- Paul's instructions to evangelists/ministers like Timothy, Titus, Tychicus, Epaphras, and others illustrate how he used them to function as "connecting ligaments" to the churches. Titus is sent to Crete, Corinth, Dalmatia. Timothy ministers to Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica as examples. They were keeping all the new works connected and cared for by mature brothers. Could these works choose another direction. Yes - 2Tim. 1:15 You know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes. But is that not an example of dysfunction rather than innate rights?

- The Restoration movement in general has only emphasized the gifts of apostles and prophets (their gift of the

scriptures) as the only active gift to unify us, not any ongoing gift of evangelists and elder/teachers who work out the practical aspects of unity. Their gifts, the latter, are meant to be giving flesh and blood applications of the biblical principles. The scriptures by themselves have never practically united the Church. There has always been the need for a life lived for Christ, the added factor, that brings the truths of God to people's hearts (Col. 1:24). Without these specific leadership gifts working, the broad unity of the church is diminished. There were roles that went beyond the local church in the New Testament. And if we going to stay connected, we still need these gifts today.

- There was no head of the 1st century Church. Jesus served as that head then as He does now. But there does seem to be leaders in key geographic areas. Paul has his sphere of influence, James his, Apollos his, and Peter his, to name a few. Yet tremendous effort was exerted to keep unified. The Jerusalem meeting in Acts 15, the contribution for the poor saints in Jerusalem, the earlier response from the disciples in Antioch to the brothers in Judea, and many other efforts demonstrate their hearts.

- Although Paul used the title of "apostle" to describe his office, it did not carry the same weight then as it does now in our lives. This seems to be reflected in the lack of respect that was at time shown him. As with most of God's prophets, they were honored more after their death than during their lives. Paul would send others not just because he was an Apostle, but because he was trying to oversee the works he had begun. The pattern was meant to be applied to others as in II Tim. 2:2, empowering others to continue to service the churches that he had begun.

II. Historical Examples in Acts and the Epistles, Part II

The methodology of Paul was to group churches regional to insure support and connection. There are regions that Paul specifically mentions. In addition, other regions are mentioned by Peter and others. For example - Judea, Galilee, Samaria, Phrygia, Galatia, Achaia, Pontus, Cappadoica, Asia, and Bithynia are listed and addressed as regions (Acts 9:31, 13:49, 16:6; 2 Cor. 11:10; I Peter 1:1).

In addition to regions, Peter, Paul, and James (and others) served in some capacity supervising over regions. There are regional responsibilities exercised by commended brothers. They seem to work together and influence each other though not without some tension. Paul, Peter, and James sharpened one another's perspective and stretched each other's spiritual understanding. They all worked to forge unity against the forces that would naturally separate. Paul's collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem surely was Paul's attempt to not only meet their physical needs but to keep the Jewish and Gentile disciples tied together as well as portray to his Jewish brothers the impact of the Gospel on the Gentiles. They took each other's counsel to insure that they helped unify rather than divide and make sure they were not running in vain (Gal. 2:2; Acts 21:22ff). Whether it is Paul correcting Peter in Antioch, Gal. 2, or James advising Paul in his last trip to Jerusalem on reducing the tension caused by his mission trips, they were very much involved in that great task to keep unified.

Financially, the different regions would aid each other as well. The Achians supported Paul while he was in Corinth. I am sure many would have had to support Paul while under house arrest in Rome with the tremendous expense of being housed and feed in the most expensive city in the world at that time, Rome. Mission trips would require great amounts of funding to go from place to place in the Roman world. Travel was not less expensive in the 1st Century, but more.

III. Practical Suggestions and Considerations

- We must keep the same resolve to work at unity in our day. There is no doubt that the New Testament Church was spread across a broad geographic areas that prevented good communication and fellowship. If Thomas made it to India and Paul to Spain, I am sure they had little contact. In our day, to use a phrase coined by Thomas Friedman, "the world is flat." If the NT church could have communicated as we can, would they have used those tools? We are all a day's travel from one another and available instantly to interact verbally and visually. What would have taken traveling evangelists in the 1st century weeks and months, for us it only hours (and we complain about that!).

- Though we are fairly comfortable in supporting a formal benevolent organization to coordinate our help to those in need, which has no NT precedent, we are uncomfortable supporting a supra church organization that does the same in

regard to the mission of the church. Is it possible to have some commended brothers who can have some regional responsibilities and financial support to help encourage and connect the churches. Shouldn't these brothers particularly make sure they stay in contact with other regions to help bind the church together world wide? II Cor. 10:15 Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our area of activity among you will greatly expand, 16 so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you. Though the Apostle Paul supported himself on occasion, there is no doubt that he was generally supported from the outside.

- Although there is at least one example of a localized evangelist, Philip, that seemed to be the exemption not the rule. In our day that practice seems reversed where exception has become the rule. Traveling evangelists were the practice and example in Acts and the Epistles. Do we need some who travel to connect the churches as in the 1st Century? The question is not so much have we "gone beyond what is written", but are we "practicing what is written?" Our movement is still kept together by brothers and sisters who travel to connect.

- We cannot be controlled by the past. The abuses of authority may have been in the hands of the few on occasion in over organized and controlled groups or in the hands of the many on occasion where autonomous churches function with little or no input from any outside their local church. Positions of authority reveal hearts, they do not by themselves corrupt. If as the common proverb says "absolute power, corrupts absolutely", then how is Jesus explained if he is truly man. He was absolutely powerful but not corrupted. Positions of authority only reveal hearts - thus there were good kings as well as bad. It was the role of king that was the problem; it only revealed the heart. This is not advocating a King (we have one - Jesus), but it is encouraging us to empower leadership rather than being paralyzed by what might go wrong. Things go wrong in every setting. Thus we need structures that help us guard our hearts and keep us focused on the values that Christ would desire.

These are just some thoughts and observations, not a new proposal for a supra church structure. Yet we must examine the scriptures and diligent pursue a unity that is demanded and expected by our Lord.

Church Builders Committee

Mike Fontenot, Scott Green, Dinesh George, John Louis, Douglas Arthur, and Shawn Wooten