

23. We believe in the spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ and Christian tolerance to all denominations of the Christian faith.

(Transcript of message preached by Pastor Rick Minett on September 18, 2005 at Grace Community Church)

"For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many" (1 Corinthians 12:12-14).

Hardly a week goes by that someone doesn't ask me about our church and the questions usually begin this way: "Are we Baptist? Are we Methodist? Are we Pentecostal? Are we this or that?" And I say, "No, we are an interdenominational fellowship of believers." And people will respond by saying, "Oh I see, so it is a non-denominational church." And I will say, "Well, we like to think of it more as an interdenominational church." Now that may seem like splitting hairs, but I think it is important. I think its important because I don't want people to somehow perceive that we are opposed to denominations. We aren't. We just happen to be an independent church, but we thank God for churches of all denominations that are helping spread the Good News of the Gospel.

There is a wonderful quote that I am sure you've heard several times that truly sums up the way I believe we should approach the subject of spiritual unity and tolerance in the Christian faith. It is actually more like a three-point sermon, so you know I'm going to like it. It has been attributed to Augustine and it goes like this: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

In Essentials, Let There Be Unity

What are those essentials? Some of you probably grew up quoting what is called "The Apostles' Creed." Well, that's a good place to start. It says: "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; He descended to the dead. On the third day He rose again; He ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church (*the word "catholic" doesn't refer to the Roman Catholic Church, but rather to the "universal church of the Lord Jesus Christ"*), the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen." For many of you, those were probably the first "essentials of the faith" that one learned as a child or as a new believer. What do I believe to be "essentials" of the faith? Frankly, most of the things that we have been talking about in this series are those "essentials" and that is why I refer to them as our fundamental truths.

For instance, we've talked about the fact that (1) it is essential that we believe that the Bible is the inspired, infallible, authoritative Word of God. (2) It is essential that we believe that there is only one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (3) It is essential that we believe in the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father and His personal return to this earth in power and glory. (4) It is essential that we believe in the reality and personality of the devil. (5) It is essential that we believe in a place called heaven, as well as a place called hell; where people will spend eternity. (6) It is essential that we believe that the only means of being cleansed from sin is through repentance and faith in the precious blood of Jesus Christ, and not of works. (7) It is essential that we believe that regeneration by the Holy Spirit is absolutely necessary for personal salvation. These are some of the "essentials" that the true church, worldwide, needs to be united in because to remove even one of them destroys the very foundation of our faith.

In Non-Essentials, Let There Be Liberty

Someone may ask, "Pastor, are there any "non-essentials" in our list of fundamental truths? The answer is "yes" and "no." In other words, to our congregation I think they are all "essentials" or we would not list them as one of our fundamental truths; however, when it comes to our relationship to the rest of the body of Christ, some of these, in my opinion, would fall under the category of "non-essentials" and these are areas where we need to be gracious and generous in spirit.

For instance, we believe in the open table at the Lord's Supper. Some churches do not. Some churches believe that Holy Communion should only be given to members of their particular church. I do not agree with that philosophy, but I do not think that should separate us as brothers in sisters in Christ. Also, we believe in tithing as God's financial plan. Others may view this differently and that is their right. I don't think that should divide us. And furthermore, even though I strongly believe in water baptism by immersion at an age of accountability, there are other faith walks that view baptism differently. I happen to think we are right; but our differences with regard to this matter should not divide us.

For example, this week I had the privilege of attending the memorial service for Danny Williams' father. It was a beautiful service, very meaningful and very uplifting. Danny's father was a great man of faith and a pillar in his local church, a Church of Christ in Pasadena. The service was very similar to any memorial service that you might attend here at our church, with this exception. When they sang, they did not use musical instruments. There are many Church of Christ churches that do not use musical instruments and there are many that

do. Now was I offended because they didn't use musical instruments? Not at all! Frankly, I was impressed with their ability to sing in harmony the way that they did. I wish we could do that. See, some people would call that an "essential" but I would not. If a church does not want to use a keyboard, that is fine with me. And if we want to use a keyboard, that should not bother them. These non-essentials should never divide the body.

In All Things, Let There Be Charity

Jesus said, *"By this ALL will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another"* (John 13:25). And that means loving people that do not look exactly the way that we look, or dress exactly the way that we dress, or think exactly the way that we think; because whether we want to accept it or not, God made us all unique, even in the body of Christ.

In our text, Paul said, *"For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many."* What does Paul mean when he says that the body is not one member but many? Paul continues, *"If a foot should say, 'Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body,' is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,' is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be?"*

We typically use this passage in reference to a local body of believers and the various gifting that each of us contribute to our church, but it also relates to the entire body of believers—the universal church of Jesus Christ. And in verse 25, Paul says, *"...there should be no schism in the body, but the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it."* If a church is going through a struggle, it ought to break our heart. It doesn't matter if it is Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Pentecostal, or whatever. It should break our heart. For the past two years our church has traveled abroad to help churches in need and what a joy that has been. But maybe next year, we need to ask God to lead us to a church in Louisiana or Mississippi or Alabama that has been devastated by Hurricane Katrina. Why? They are hurting and they are our brothers and sisters in the Lord!

Think of it this way: I wear contact lens, so I'm constantly aware of my eyes. Recently I've spent a small fortune on dental work so I am pretty aware of my teeth. But I must admit that I hardly ever give my liver a second thought. I'm not trying to offend my liver, but I just do not think about it near as much as my eyes or my teeth. But take away my liver and I am in a heap of trouble. I don't think about my toes much. Do you think about yours a lot? If so, call me this week and I'll refer you to someone that can help you. Seriously, without them it is nearly impossible to balance the rest of the body. And how about when you get in a car? Do you sit there and think about the radiator cap or the distributor or the lug nuts on the wheels or the oil pan bolts? I don't. But if any of them are missing, I can assure you that you are going to end up on the side of the freeway somewhere.

The point is obvious, isn't it? Things that seem insignificant oftentimes aren't! Everything and everyone serves a purpose and that is why I thank God that there is not only diversity in a local fellowship of believers like ours, but that there is diversity in the church body as a whole. Some churches are very formal, while others are incredibly casual. Some folks will only sing church hymns, while others would not know a church hymn from a hole in the ground. I like a little of both. I like a little high church from time to time and a relaxed atmosphere at other times. I love great church anthems, but I also love contemporary worship choruses. I am glad there is diversity in the body of Christ because it gives everyone the opportunity to find what fits best with his personality and his makeup. So regardless of our differences, that's why Paul tells us to promote unity *"(Let there) be no schism in the body..."* and promote charity *"...but that all members should have the same care for one another."*

In 1981, I had the privilege of serving on the executive committee of the Billy Graham Crusade which was held at Rice University. I also had the privilege of being actively involved in the Billy Graham Crusade in Cincinnati in the 1970's. When Billy Graham is gone and everyone is writing his life story, he will probably be remembered for these three things: (1) For his simple but powerful preaching. (2) For the number of people that attended his crusades around the world and the numbers that came to Christ. (3) For the influence he had on world leaders, especially a great number of U.S. Presidents.

But in my mind, Dr. Graham and his team accomplished an even greater feat. And that is: No one in history has brought together more churches with differing faith backgrounds to accomplish the goal of telling people about Jesus Christ. When I sat in those executive committee meetings in 1981, I sat there with pastors of Baptist churches and Presbyterian churches and Methodist churches and Lutheran churches and Pentecostal churches...and on and on the list goes. I was there with pastors of white churches and black churches; large churches and small churches. And we all joined together, maybe for the only time in Houston's history, to proclaim the Good News. That, to me, is the most remarkable thing about Billy Graham's ministry; and that, to me, is why his ministry has had the impact that it has had over all these many decades. Dr. Graham was able to convince hard-headed, stubborn, and usually insecure preachers to buy into a philosophy that said: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

So in conclusion, when there is essential Christian doctrine at stake, as followers of Christ we need to stand firm. There are clear moral absolutes. There are such things as right and wrong. There is black and white. And on these issues, we must take a stand without wavering. Secondly, when there is non-essential Christian doctrine at stake, I think we need to be flexible and gracious and rejoice in the common faith we share. One thing is for sure, we can't all be right. And I, for one, just happen to think that heaven is going to reveal that we were all a little wrong here and there. And lastly, regardless of the situation and regardless of our differences, we need to be loving, compassionate, and patient.

For years and years, Houston has taken a bad rap. People outside of Houston (especially in Dallas) have portrayed Houston as uncultured, primitive cowboys who spit tobacco everywhere and only drive pickup trucks. We know that's not true, but that is the way a lot of people used to think of Houston. But not anymore! Now that this city has come together and we have opened up our hearts, hands, and wallets after Hurricane Katrina to the needy—people all around the world are talking about how great Houstonians are. Our public image as a city has changed dramatically in the past month, all because of something called love. Even Oprah is talking about how great Houston is! That's the power of love.

Do you remember the old Ultrabright toothpaste commercial? Their slogan was, "How's your love life?" That needs to be a question that the body of Christ keeps front and center at all times, because people know we are Christians by our love. Or as the Apostle Paul told the saints in Corinth: *"If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all His mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, 'Jump,' and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing. If I give everything I own to the poor and go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love. Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, doesn't force itself on others, isn't always "me first," doesn't fly off the handle, doesn't keep score of the sins of others, and doesn't revel when others grovel. It takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, puts up with anything, trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end"* (1 Corinthians 13:1-8, The Message).