

Grow Together: Unity is Oneness

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Ephesians 4:4-6

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Paul uses the word “one” seven times in Ephesians 4:4-6. Thus, “oneness” is crucial to the Lord and His church. While the word, “Trinity,” does not appear in the Bible, the concept is frequent (beginning in Genesis 1:26, *“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’—using the plural rather than the singular pronoun*). Jesus called God “Father,” but God is not a male with human-type anatomy. God is Spirit. God transcends gender. While God is not male, the Bible uses a masculine term to make God personal. As the hymn goes, *“God in three persons, blessed trinity.”* God the Son, and God the Spirit (the Greek word for Spirit is feminine) are all used in our text. Note the emphasis on the unity of the Godhead—three in one. What is known of the godhead is what the Spirit wants us to embody in Jesus’ church: unity. Certainly, one of the most important passages and a vital prayer in Judaism is the “Shema” from Deuteronomy 6:4 (*shema* is the Hebrew word for “hear”): *“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.”* Love prompts unity; unity promotes love, not division. God is love. God is three-in-one. Deuteronomy 6:5-7 goes on: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.”* The result of love is action: *“You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.”*

“Oneness” was critically important to Jesus in His prayer in John 17. Note the final verse (26) emphasizes love: *“that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”* Love was essential to the maturity and mission of the church.

APPLICATION: How often do you pray for the unity and mission of the church? How can you grow in this area of your spiritual life? How often do you fast and pray? What do you need to do? What breaks down unity? How can you promote unity?

We believe we can do something to help us Grow Together: wear name tags. When you check in for worship on your smart phone there’s a way you can sign-up to get one and pick it up at Guest Services next week. Very easy. It’s hard to grow with someone when you don’t know their name. COVID has thrown us for a loop, too. A lot of us have forgotten names. Someone told me they are hard of hearing - seeing the name is more helpful than trying to hear it. Anyway, we’d like for you to get one and wear it as an act of hospitality on Sundays when you come. People will call you by name if you’ll wear your name tag.

Deut. 6:4 "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is ONE."

John 10:30 I and the Father are ONE."

John 15:17 These things I command you, so that you will love ONE another.

John 17:11 Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be ONE, even as we are ONE.

John 17:20-21 "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be ONE, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

1 Corinthians 12:12-13 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— Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of ONE Spirit.

Ephesians 4:4-6

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Paul uses the word “one” 7x in these 3 verses. “One” is very exclusive. There are not 2 or 3 or 14. It is not Buddhism or individual meditation. Those things easily end up into “My Truth” which is highly subjective. “My Truth” harms unity because my truth will inevitably contrast with your truth. Individual biases never put us on the same page. We will not function as a team or a church, but only as individual achievers/believers.

In Phil Jackson’s book, “11 Rings” (NBA world championships), he describes coaching Michael Jordan, Scotty Pippen, Dennis Rodman, Kobe Bryant, and Shaq. He writes about the 5 stages of tribal development from another book, “Tribal Leadership.” These stages are:

1) Despair and hostility with the collective belief that ALL OF LIFE is AWFUL. They can’t catch a break. Life is unfair and upside down. Most street gangs are in this stage. They usually don’t have a father figure. They aren’t stupid; they just don’t have much of a choice. Work at McDonald’s for minimum wage or sell drugs and make thousands of dollars until caught and go to jail.

2) Apathetic people who perceive themselves as VICTIMS. They are passive/aggressive. They think THEIR LIFE (not ALL of it like #1) is awful, too. Think of the Dilbert comic strip or “Flash” the sloth at the Department of Mammal Vehicles in Zootopia. About 25% of the workplace is like this. They just do the least amount of work for the most amount of pay.

3) INDIVIDUAL ACHIEVEMENT. “I’m great – you’re not.” They have a will to win, but are lone warriors, not team players. They feel they are good at their job and work harder than others, but that others they work with have somehow let them down. Their tone is around “I, me, mine, myself.” It’s like the wild, wild, west.

4) TRIBAL PRIDE - TEAMWORK – Individual achievement is usually small and limited. “Two are better than one” and five working together as a team will win championships whereas one great player won’t. There has to be an epiphany, an “Aha!” moment to move from 3 to 4. “We’re great – they aren’t.” The “I” language is out - the “WE” language is in. “I am because We are.” Teamwork.

5) LIFE IS GREAT. We don’t play against someone – we compete for something much bigger. Phil Jackson calls it “the spiritual nature of the game.” Innocent wonder overwhelmed with gratitude. A Stage-Five culture will outperform a Stage-Four culture, and a Stage-Four culture will outperform a Stage Three culture, etc.

Stage 4 and especially Stage 5 is where there is a bond that is formed. They become a brotherhood.

Jackson tried to coach by being a coach who brought out the best in his players. He wasn't a "My Way or the Highway" coach. He wanted everyone to play a leadership role. He borrowed something that Vince Lombardi, the legendary Green Bay Packers coach told his players at the start of the training camp each summer. Jackson would get his players to stand at the baseline under the basket. He'd tell them: *"God has ordained me to coach you young men, and I embrace the role I've been given. If you wish to accept the game I embrace and follow my coaching, as a sign of your commitment, step across that line."* They did it in a fun, but serious way. And wonder of wonders, all the players did so.

Jackson tried to inspire his players, not berate, humiliate, or embarrass them.

He tried to get them to work together as a team. He told them the story about the old Japanese samurai warrior and his 3 sons. He gave each of them a stick and told them to break it. No problem. But then he gave each one of them another stick and asked them to hand it to him. He tied the 3 together and asked them break it. None of them could. He said, *"If you tie 3 sticks together, you will never be defeated."* It illustrates the point that a team is the strongest when they surrender their self-interest for the greater good.

Both Jackson's parents were Pentecostal preachers. He had to attend his father's church in the morning and go back to hear his mother's sermon that night. They also had to go to Wednesday night services and his parents were very strict about everything. When he was about 11, his mother told him it was time for him to be filled with the Holy Spirit and to speak in tongues. He wasn't desiring that, but they prayed with him every Sunday night to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Not only did it not happen, but he began looking for a way out. That is how we found basketball at school and gave himself to all the school activities he could find. For him, the Christian faith was following religious doctrines and rules. When he went to college, he heard that humans had been walking upright on the earth for 4 million years. That didn't square with the literal Bible teaching his parents said. So, Jackson is not a Christian. He is on his own spiritual journey and enlightenment.

There are many people like Jackson today who have rejected Christianity for several reasons. Some of it comes from being around mean-spirited and legalistic Christians.

I find it ironic that this great basketball coach who wants to get his teams out of themselves and to form a bond with their teammates, wants to personally spiritualize by going it alone. He is basically on a spiritual journey but he's a Stage 3 guy – individual achievement. Paul isn't saying, "anything goes – make up your own mind – be on your own journey."

In Jim Smith's book, **"The Magnificent Story,"** we hear his story of also rejected "shrunken stories" of the gospel. One comes from the religious left ("social gospel") which has little doctrine. The other is from a legalistic group – you must do everything just right. Both miss the point. The point = following Jesus.

Jesus' team, the disciples, moved from the lower stages where they were each in their own story (mostly in Stage 1 and 2), when something happened: The resurrection. That's wonder. Stage 5. The whole of the Christian faith is about the resurrection. If Jesus is resurrected, then everything He said and taught is validated for all time. If not, we're wasting our time here and

following Him; we should revert to stage 3. The problem with stage 3 and even stage 4 = the story. Jackson won 11 NBA championship rings by buying into a larger story. That is amazing! However, his faith story is shrunken. When Jesus becomes part of our lives, not only do "I" become part of "WE," but I have a Magnificent Story because I am connected to the only One who is truly Magnificent. Today is THE day to give yourself to Him and to be with others in His Magnificent Story who love Him, too.