

# Does “Christian Unity” Have a Prayer?

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
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- [1 Corinthians 1:10-18](#) “Be completely united, with only one thought and one purpose.” (v. 10b)
- [John 17:20-23](#) “I pray that they may all be one.”
- [Sermon-in-a-sentence](#): Let us seek to fulfill the prayer of Jesus “that they may all be one.”

How many of you were aware that we’re in the middle of something called the “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity”? I didn’t know that until I saw it on a calendar the other day. Doesn’t get much press, does it?

Does it seem odd to any of you that followers of Jesus should have to *pray* about the aspiration of being united? Theoretically, having to *strive* for Christian unity makes no sense.

But practically, we understand the problem perfectly. After all, for some of us, we tend to have our suspicions about those “other” Christians. I know I’ve had my doubts.

I’m part of the Rocky River Clergy Association which meets monthly. We have devotional time together. We have topical discussions, perhaps on church building security, or how our churches approach financial stewardship, or church uses of websites and social media, or how we plan worship. Clergy from most River congregations choose to participate, but not all. We have Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox participants, as well as some others. The clergy from the Unitarian-Universalist Church have been active in our group. Several years ago at a hospital seminar I became acquainted with a lay leader from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Westlake. His name is Bill. Although the Mormon Church doesn’t have clergy, Bill was looking to connect with a group of area church leaders. Bill said that Westlake didn’t have a clergy group, but he’d heard that Rocky River did. I invited him to visit us. He’s been active ever since.

In the past I’ve told you about my family’s history with the Mormon Church. In a nutshell, a wagon train comprised largely of Fancher ancestors from Arkansas was massacred by Mormons in the Utah Territory in 1857 – about 120 persons. I learned of this about fifteen years ago. Before I’d heard about the Mountain Meadows Massacre that killed Alexander Fancher and his extended family I didn’t know much nor care much about the Mormon Church. After learning about Mountain Meadows I’ll admit that I had a degree of distain for the Latter-Day Saints Church. My distain arose partly from what they’d done long, long ago, and partly because the little I knew about Mormon theology puts them outside of the mainstream of the Christian tradition.

But then I got to know Bill, the Mormon lay leader from Westlake who also was welcomed warmly by the Rocky River Clergy Association. Over the years I got to learn a bit about Mormon history, theology, community, and was favorably impressed by some but not all of what I learned. I still don’t agree with some Mormon religious beliefs and practices, but I do feel a greater measure of respect and appreciation for them.

To be honest, the same can be said about my view of our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers. The worship at “St. Chris” is obviously Christ-centered, but the first several times I attended mass there it left me cold. The service felt even more repetitious than our own, and seemed disconnected from the real world. I got the feeling that many worshipers were there not because of personal choice but because of institutional obligation. I was offended that Catholic doctrine

excludes non-Catholic Christians from the Lord's Supper – "How presumptuous! How unwelcoming!" I thought.

But over the years I've grown to know first Father Tom and, for the past twenty years, Father John. I've learned how it was that they felt called to become priests. I've learned about the joys and struggles of their personal lives (and yes, priests have personal lives!).

Through our monthly get-togethers I've come to know that in our work the Catholic fathers and Protestant pastors and Orthodox priests deal with similar issues. The result of our monthly clergy gatherings, getting to know one another, engaging with each other, supporting each other, even golfing with each other... the result has been a greater degree of "Christian unity." But we had to work at it; it didn't just happen on its own.

Today's reading from John's gospel comes from a section of the gospel often referred to as Jesus' Farewell Discourse or Priestly Prayer. It's the longest prayer in the New Testament, encompassing chapters 14-17. In several places Jesus lifts up his concern for the apostles and the wider community of believers. Jesus says, "I pray that they may all be one." We can infer that even back then in the earliest days of the Christian faith, there was division among the believers. Indeed, Luke's gospel reported that while the apostles were still traveling with and learning from Jesus, they argued among themselves about which of them was "top dog" among Christ's disciples.

As the Christian faith grew and expanded, so did the divisions that separated followers of Jesus from each other. We hear that clearly in the opening verses of the apostle Paul's first letter to the Christians in Corinth, Greece. Paul wrote,

...There are quarrels among you... One says, "I follow Paul," another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Peter"; and another, "I follow Christ." Christ has been divided into groups!<sup>1</sup>

Indeed we have. Drive anywhere and you'll be reminded that now the Christian world is comprised of Orthodox and Protestant and Catholic Christians. Christendom features Presbyterians and Methodists, Episcopalian and Lutherans, Baptists and Pentecostals. Christianity is housed in majestic cathedrals, quaint churches, and ramshackle storefront ministries. We have national denominations, regional associations, independent churches, and do-it-yourself "mom-and-pop"-style ministries.

And yet the prayer, the desire, the hope of Jesus was that we "may all be one."

I believe it still can happen. And it can happen without Baptists giving up baptism by immersion, or Catholics abandoning their belief in the transubstantiation of communion elements, or Presbyterians surrendering their unique arrangement of ordained elders as a balance to ordained clergy. Someone has stated that "Unity despite diversity is exactly what defines Christianity...."<sup>2</sup> So, what will it take for all of our churches to be one?

Let's start with humility. Personal humility and institutional humility. Imagine each of us giving ourselves an added dose of humility to realize that we don't always have all the answers. Imagine embracing the humility to acknowledge that the way we do things is not necessarily the right way or the only way. Imagine walking away from the notion that we know the mind and purpose and intention of God... or worse, that we know better than God. Humility helps us break down barriers that may serve to keep others distant.

Another ingredient for "being one" is respect, by which I mean recognizing the legitimacy of people who are different from us. You came to be Presbyterian perhaps by being born into this tradition. Or maybe you married into the Presbyterian Church. Or maybe you wrestled with your faith and came to see that the Presbyterian Church allowed you to explore and express your faith in a

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:11-13 (excerpted) Good News translation

<sup>2</sup> R. Alan Woods "Apologia: A Collection of Christian Essays" [2006] quoted at <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/unity-in-the-church>, accessed 1/18/2017

way that was genuine, that resonated with you. It probably didn't just happen to you. You chose to experience your faith through the Presbyterian Church.

Why wouldn't that be the same for people in other traditions? They chose to explore the Christian faith through the Anglican or Apostolic or Congregational church tradition. We must presume that their choice is as grounded in faith as yours. While we may not agree with other Christian traditions in their theological outlook or viewpoint on social issues, we can strive to respect them for their sincerity. That would be a huge step toward Christian unity.

Three more ingredients that would move Christians toward "being one" would be the willingness to imagine and adapt and collaborate.

1 Corinthians 8:6 affirms "...Yet there is for us only one God, the Father, who is the Creator of all things and for whom we live; and there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things were created and through whom we live."<sup>3</sup> Imagine... *imagine* what it means for people of different nationalities, ethnicities, socio-economic positions, education levels, that Jesus is Lord of *all!*

Next, think how unity in the Christian faith has been enriched by the church's ability to adapt to change.

- As societies became literate, the Scriptures were freed from the control of the clergy and made available to the people in the pew.
- As societies recognized the inherent equality of all persons, races and ethnicities realized they could share in worship, women were able to join men in church leadership, people once the subject of discrimination were given their right to share in the ministry and mission of the church.
- As societies embraced technology, worship and fellowship and invitations to engage in mission were no longer confined within the walls of a church.

Finally, consider how unity in the Christian faith has been enriched whenever the church sought opportunities to collaborate. A close-to-home example of collaboration is our summer Vacation Bible School program which we run jointly with St. Christopher Church. Our goal is to spark the hearts and minds of children with the love of God through knowledge of Jesus. Because there's power in numbers, we collaborate with St. Christopher Church for VBS to offer a more effective and more efficient program. And a side benefit is that the children – and the teen helpers and the adult volunteers – experience collaboration as Catholic and Presbyterian and Methodist and more share the experience with one another.

Let's remember, friends: churches are not in competition with each other. For God's sake we are competing for the hearts and minds and hands of people who don't connect with God and others through a church. There are many, many people who have not yet discovered the joy and comfort that comes from acknowledging God's rule over the universe and their own lives. There are others for whom some hurt, some pain, some grievance prompted them to leave a church. Our church can bless some people, but not all will care for this church. But there's a church down the street that might suit them better, or the one around the corner, or the one across town. Collaboration, not competition is another way for us to strive to answer Christ's prayer "that they all may be one."

When you go home I want you to finish this sermon. The next section would address, "Well, if we can seek to be one in the *church* despite our many differences, how can we also seek to be one in *society*? Despite many differences in viewpoints, values, goals, how can we bring the healing, helpful, hopeful spirit of Jesus to our nation, to the world?" By the grace and power of Jesus that's the chapter we each need to create and carry out.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 8:6 Good News translation