## Chapter 12
## Worship and Unity:
## Humility vs. Pride

*A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.*[1]
—Martin Luther

Judy and Cindy hadn't been getting along. They were both very involved in the evangelism programs of their local church. They both had a passionate heart to see people introduced to Jesus for the first time, but they couldn't agree on how to run the ministry; they had different strategies. Each woman wanted to involve a different group of workers and while both of them respected the pastor, these two ladies couldn't see eye to eye on how to carry out the vision. The tension between these women was obvious to their co-workers. Their angry exchanges of words put a damper on their team meetings. The resulting disunity was beginning to sap the team's energy to reach the lost.

This scenario sounds like a modern day church, but it's actually from the first century—the church in Philippi. I've changed the names and embellished the story a tiny bit, but most of it is taken right out of Paul's letter to the Philippians.

Settling this disagreement was one of Paul's main reasons for writing the letter. "Now I appeal to Euodia and Syntyche [Cindy and Judy]. Please, because you belong to the Lord, settle your disagreement" (Phil 4:2 NLT). I can picture our fictional characters Judy and Cindy each being passionate about their own ministry vision. Each of them felt they had the right idea. Evidently they needed to learn more deeply that love " … does not demand it's own way … " (1 Cor 13:5 NLT).

Unfortunately, I can think of a lot of examples of disagreement between church members and leaders. I've been a party to many a disagreement, both in church life and in all kinds of other relationships. Where there are humans interacting with one another, there will often be disagreement. What's the remedy for disharmony and how does it relate to a heart of worship?

### Submission Amidst a Narcissistic Culture

Narcissism is defined both as "a doctrine that individual self-interest is the actual motive of all conscious action" and "inordinate fascination with oneself; excessive self-love." That's a pretty good description of the spirit of our age, the one that could so easily be titled "It's All About Me." Such a mindset is the exact opposite of what Jesus taught, but sadly it's highly prevalent in the church.

> Garrison Keillor once said that there are only two ways to cure raging narcissism: Have children or … move to a foreign country where people don't care who you are or what you do.[2]

I understand the first option. Having eight kids is teaching me not to be so self-centered. Sadly, many believers in Jesus take the second option. They distance themselves from close relationships to others, thereby avoiding the issue of cooperation altogether. In so doing, they avoid God's design for becoming Christ-like. The worship journey was never meant to be a solo ride.

A pastor I know used to do a lot of marriage counseling. A woman at the church where he was serving approached him one Sunday and said she wanted a divorce so she could marry her husband's brother. Needless to say, he was shocked. When he awkwardly told the woman that he would not feel comfortable doing their wedding, she angrily blurted out, "But doesn't the Bible say that God wants us to be happy?"

Gary Kinnaman, author and pastor, accurately describes the distortion of the pursuit of happiness among American Christians:

> We are obsessed with happiness and have little or no capacity for suffering and loss. After all, it's one of our "unalienable rights"—"life, liberty and *the pursuit of happiness.*"
>
> Whatever "happiness" meant to our Founding Fathers, of course, was much different from what it means today: that my country must, at all costs, protect my right to pursue, unfettered, my own happiness … Good American Christians will sacrifice their most cherished and important relationships, will leave the church where they've known people for years, will even disobey God himself and end a marriage of twenty-five years, all in the relentless pursuit of the elusive god of personal happiness.[3]

Divorcing your spouse of two decades is commonplace in our society, but Paul explains in the book of Romans that if you *really* want to worship God, "don't copy the behavior and customs of this world … " (Rom 12:2 NLT). To worship is to submit to God, who *is* love. To worship Him is to yield to, and practice, his ways of love. The most prevalent ideas of worship in the original biblical languages are translated as *service and grateful submission to God.* Submission to God leads to mutual submission among believers, in marriages, and in working relationships. We read in Ephesians: "Submit to God *out of reverence for Christ*" (Eph 5:21, emphasis added).

Richard Foster includes "The Discipline of Submission" in his book *Celebration of Discipline.* Foster says that, "every Discipline has its corresponding freedom. What freedom corresponds to submission? It is the ability to lay down the terrible burden of always needing to get our own way."[4] Jesus is our model for "not getting our own way."

**Giving Love Begins with Receiving Love**

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul directs their attention to their experience with the life-giving Holy Spirit. They had tasted of God's love but there was a disconnect between receiving and giving that love. So Paul appeals to them to get in touch with the comfort and encouragement they've received from knowing Christ: "Is there *any encouragement* from belonging to Christ? *Any comfort* from his love? *Any fellowship* together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate?" (Phil 2:1 NLT).

Paul is in essence urging the Philippians to remember that, "the Holy Spirit has made his home in your hearts! The God of all comfort is dwelling inside of you! The Father has spoken to you over and over again! He has let you know in the deepest part of your heart that you are His beloved child! As you've worshipped together as devoted brothers and sisters, he has come near to you!"

Having tasted of God's love, they had the wherewithal to *live a life of love*. When we receive the Holy Spirit, there should be a corresponding outward change of behavior. After all:

> … if worship does not change us, it has not been worship. To stand before the Holy One of eternity is to change. Resentments cannot be held with the same tenacity when we enter His gracious light. As Jesus said, we will need to leave our gift at the altar and go set the matter straight (Matt. 5:23-24). In worship an increased power steals its way into the heart sanctuary, an increased compassion grows in the soul. To worship is to change.[5]

Being loved by God and our friends in the faith enables us to defer to one another. So Paul says:

> … then [since you've truly received God's love] make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose. Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves (Phil 2:2-3 NLT).

That's a radical statement. If I think of you as better than myself, then I'm going to value your opinion above my own. That's not easy to do. It goes against our natural urge to have our own way.

Several months ago I spent a few days with a team of worship arts leaders who were struggling with the sudden and shocking resignation of their senior pastor from his position of over 25 years. Though this man had faithfully served his church, the board of elders was forcing him out of his role. His close friends and co-workers were hurt, angry and confused about how this could be allowed to happen.

One of the ways I encouraged them was with this scripture from Philippians 2, particularly the words "consider others better than yourselves." That was the last thing they felt like doing. They were more inclined to strangle the perpetrators of this injustice, so it was a chance for them to "be imitators of God" (Eph 5:1). It required them to lay down their visceral reaction to injustice, a chance to love their enemies. (At least it *felt* like they were enemies). Their great challenge was to live a life of love and offer themselves as a sweet-smelling offering and sacrifice to God.

Francois Fenelon said, "Happy the soul which by a sincere self-renunciation, holds itself ceaselessly in the hands of its Creator, ready to do everything which he wishes; which never stops saying to itself a hundred times a day, 'Lord, what wouldst thou that I should do.'"[6]

Richard Foster comments on this passage from Fenelon:

> Does that [constant yielding to God] sound impossible? The only reason we believe it to be far beyond us is that we don't understand Jesus as our present Teacher. When we have been under His tutelage for a time we see how it is possible for every motion of our lives to have its root in God."[7]

Being "under the tutelage" of "Jesus as our present Teacher" is the moment-by-moment yielding to the Holy Spirit that constitutes a life of worship. It is the submitted life, the humble life that puts God and other first. We can't do it in our own strength, but we can do it by the real and effective enabling of God's Spirit. I love the phrase "Jesus our present Teacher." It's a beautiful description of our Friend and Mentor being always with us, ready to nudge us in the right direction. Training our souls to be always attentive to Him is a lifelong process.

**Let Love Be Your Highest Goal**

We see the same issues popping up in the church in Corinth. The new Christians in Corinth were very excited about using their spiritual gifts, and Paul strongly encouraged this pursuit. But the Corinthians' lack of concern for one another while using these gifts made it necessary for Paul to clarify, "let *love* be your highest goal … " (1 Cor 14:1 NLT, emphasis added).

Personal advancement and pride were getting in the way of real love, so Paul had to say "For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" (1 Cor 4:7). People were seeking an elevated spiritual status in the church through using their gifts. They were trying to impress one another.

Paul confronts this attitude in Philippi. He says, "don't try to impress others." I think that part of the problem with Judy and Cindy is that they were trying to impress others,

vying for a place of greater prominence under Paul's ministry and struggling to control the ministry situation. They each had a vested interest in carrying out their own agenda because their status in the church would be enhanced if their ideas won the day. Sound familiar? The truth is that this is part of human nature.

Judy and Cindy's important goal of bringing people to Christ was eclipsing the highest goal of all; to love at all times. Their vision was clouded, the unity was gone, and they couldn't see straight. Small issues of contention became the main issues and instead of unity, there was competition. Whenever people are competing for visibility and prominence, some people will end up feeling left out. In Corinth, some people felt *left out* because they didn't have certain spiritual gifts: "And if the ear should say because I am not an eye, *I do not belong* to the body … " (1 Cor 12:26). The less gifted ones felt like they *didn't belong.*

Paul gives the answer to this problem in the next chapter, which is 1 Corinthians 13, the famous "love chapter." Love is not self-seeking (church isn't all about me), love does not envy (when someone else is more gifted than me), love keeps no record of wrongs (when I feel hurt or excluded by someone's words), love always protects, always trusts, always endures (even when I've been mistreated or misunderstood by imperfect people, I'm going to make the choice to love).

**You Are Not Your Own**

The foundational verse for the discipline of submission is this: " … If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34).

The old "you" is dead. There's a new you who is alive in Christ and who *belongs* to God. So Paul appeals to Judy and Cindy " … because you *belong to the Lord*, settle your disagreement" (Phil 4:2 NLT, emphasis added). In Christ we give up our own rights, including our right to "get our own way." To be Christ-centered is to be other-centered.

Paul put Jesus first, others second, and his own needs last. He said: "For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better" (Phil 1:21 NLT). A few verses later he is " … torn between two desires: I long to go and be with Christ, which would be far better for me. But *for your sakes*, it is better that I continue to live. Knowing this, I am convinced that I will remain alive *so I can continue to help all of you* grow and experience the joy of your faith" (Phil 1:23-25 NLT). For Paul, life was all about helping others, not his own comfort.

Love doesn't hang onto personal privileges. Our model for this is Jesus, who gave up his divine privileges. In my home I frequently need to let go of my ideas because my wife has a different—and often better—idea than mine. In church leadership I've often had to give up my right to enact my own plans.

We have more than 33,000 Christian denominations in the world. Why? Because through the centuries church leaders haven't been able to submit to one another and lay down their own ideas. Our culture teaches us to hang on to, stand up for and fight for our rights, yet the way of love says, "let it go, love is more important." Love is not self-seeking. If love is our highest goal, then almost everything else is negotiable.

**Individuals or Members of a Family?**

Because we're part of a church planting movement and have helped pioneer new churches, I've been a member of eight different churches in the last thirty-five years. We've been in churches of all sizes, from mega-churches to tiny congregations. The experiences gained along the way have taught us many things, like the fact that our culture teaches us to be extremely independent, individualistic people. My generation, the baby boomers, is especially steeped in the value of being autonomous and self-directing. The modern age celebrates the self-made man who pulls himself up by his own bootstraps and creates his own destiny.

All of this works against our call to come together as the church. We are prone to say, "I'll do it myself," "I can figure it out," and "I can be responsible for myself." I have to work at resisting this kind of thinking. I have to fight the tendency to work in isolated independence.

We don't understand and experience the kind of corporate identity that we see in the Bible. Here is a list of the many ways our identity as a *people of God* is described in the New Testament:

1. the brothers and sisters, the flock protected by the Shepherd
2. the body of Christ, a living expression of the Spirit of Jesus
3. the branches nourished by the vine, the temple of the Holy Spirit
4. a city—the new covenant community, fellow citizens with God's people
5. the household of faith, the family of God, the bride of Christ
6. building blocks in the temple in which God's royal presence lives
7. church (*ekklesia*)—"assembly," "called out ones"
8. a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God
9. God's fellow workers; God's field, God's building

If we value being part of a body, a household, a family, then we'll defer to the greater good for everyone even if it means we don't get our own way. As the parents of eight kids, Linda and I are constantly thinking about how to make things work for everyone. Whether it's placing kids in the right pairings in bedrooms, planning a vacation, sharing food or going on a hike, we constantly have to be thinking about what's best for the group, even if that means making a personal sacrifice.

A few months ago our entire family went for an afternoon to walk on the boardwalk at the beach. Our oldest child is Zachary, who is twenty-three years old and our youngest child, Elizabeth, is seven years old. As Lizzie walked with us that day, I realized that for the first time in twenty-three years of family life, we could all walk at the same pace together! No more babies or toddlers who have to be carried or pushed in a stroller! No more waiting for the stragglers!

In church and work relationships, people "walk at a different pace." Maybe one of Judy and Cindy's main problems was simply a timing issue; one wanted to eagerly push ahead with an outreach project while the other one felt led by God to wait until the team of workers was more prepared.

The body of Christ is a mosaic of individuals from vastly different backgrounds, education levels, with diverse personalities, gifts and interests. Some of us are pioneers and some are settlers. Some are hard-chargers and some are nurturers. Some are evangelistic and some are pastoral. We see things differently. So we have to wait for one another, respecting the limitations and heartfelt convictions of our brothers and sisters. We have to "change the way we think" and become less independent and more community driven.

As God's beloved children we belong not only to Him but also to one another. It is true that "in Christ we who are many form one body, and *each member belongs to all the others*" (Rom 12:5, emphasis added). Read it again, will you? Isn't that a radically different idea from the way our first-world, postmodern, culture thinks?

An astonishing example of "belonging to one another" is found in the second chapter of Acts. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit came in power and the results were far reaching. Everyone spent a lot of time together in meals, fellowship, work and worship. There was a common purse allowing everyone to share all of their material possessions. Can first-world, middle-class Christians live out this value of "belonging to one another?" I'm sure it's possible but I haven't experienced it on an Acts 2 level. Not yet, at least.

## Abiding in God's Love

But it is worth pursuing. We can't fully experience the benefits of God's love unless we give ourselves away. "To properly pursue love, we must strive to give it away rather than simply find it. If we don't, we endanger ourselves by becoming the ultimate consumers."[8]

If the water in a stream stops running, a stagnant pool forms. Some of the fish will die because they're not getting the oxygen and nutrients they need. Likewise, stopping the outward flow of God's love from our lives makes our spirits stagnant. When we stop being patient, gentle and kind, we receive less nurture and nourishment from God. After

all, *He is love*; to act otherwise is to resist his very nature. The only way you can fully experience God's love is to always be giving it away. As Paul says: "Do *everything* with love" (1Cor 16:14 NLT, emphasis added).

We see this interdependence between harmonious relationships and the experience of God's presence in Paul's letter to the Corinthians where he tells his readers to " … be joyful. Grow to maturity. Encourage each other. Live in harmony and peace. *Then* the God of love and peace will be with you" (2 Cor 13:11 NLT, emphasis added). Put negatively, this verse implies "If you have disunity, you won't have as much of God's presence."

We can't *see things* properly if we're holding a grudge or embroiled in envy. I've seen the negative proof of this many times in church life when people's hearts are hardened to one another and they become closed off to counsel. Someone who was my good friend one day became my enemy the next day because they were convinced I was wrong and they *knew* they were right.

When unity is squelched, so is clear thinking and receiving wisdom from God. Paul says, "My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and *united* in love*, so that* they may have the full riches of *complete understanding*, *in order* that they may *know the mystery of God* …" (Col 2:2, emphasis added). Without unity, we don't have full access to God's wisdom.

**Spiritual Warfare and Submission**

Peter describes the devil as "a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." Believe it or not, this line appears in the context of a discussion about relationships! To avoid being "devoured," Peter instructs *everyone* to humble themselves to one another:

> *Young men*, in the same way be *submissive* to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the *proud* but gives grace to the humble." *Humble yourselves*, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he *may lift you up* in due time … Be self-controlled and alert. Your *enemy the devil prowls* around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in your faith … (1 Pet 5:5-9).

The most venomous and hurtful spiritual warfare I've experienced in the church is when relationships fall apart. People stop submitting to God and one another, and they start attacking and criticizing one another.

Pride, the opposite of humility, is a double-edged sword—cutting us off from God and one another. When pride rules us, no longer do we consider one another better than ourselves. Then the devil has a heyday. This is nothing new; the early church struggled with the same problem.

It's the same story in James' epistle. "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? … God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (Jas 4:7).

The dangers addressed in this passage are the harmfulness of cruel words and anger, the desire to be lifted up above other people, and the struggle in submitting to one another. When we stumble in those areas, a door is opened for the enemy to wreak havoc in our relationships.

A third example of warfare in relationships is from Ephesians: '"In your anger do not sin:' Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Eph 4:26-27).

Anger is often the flash point that divides Christians—in business, ministry or marriage. It is true that "Christians have never known exactly what to do with anger. Anger arises from a sense of violation: a violation of self, of agreements, of principles. It also arises when we feel a threat to our social status or a desire to control other people's lives."[9]

Evagrius of Ponticus lived in and around Constantinople in the fourth century. He was heavily influenced by Origen and wrote extensively on the psychology of spiritual devotion. Evagrius identified eight deadly thoughts that can agitate our mind and ruin our life. One of these deadly thoughts is anger:

> The most fierce passion is anger. In fact it is defined as a boiling and stirring up of wrath against one who has given injury. It tends to lead to a preoccupation with the one with whom we are angry. It ruins our health—both physical and mental.[10]

Our characters Judy and Cindy, in Philippi, were likely angry with one another. I am all too familiar with this emotion of anger and I admit that I get angry in traffic jams, angry at my children and angry when I can't get quick results. The only way out of anger is confession of sin and submission to God and others. Humility and confession loosens the grip of anger.

**Forgiveness and Gratitude**

There will invariably be times we have to forgive one another when we're wronged. Harsh words are spoken, offence is taken and without forgiveness our relationships with God and others are stifled. Erwin McManus explains the connection between forgiveness and gratitude:

> Forgiveness and gratitude are inseparable. When we receive forgiveness, we grow in gratefulness. When we grow in gratefulness,

> we are more willing to give forgiveness. Our ability to receive forgiveness is directly related to our willingness to give it. A direct benefit of gratitude is the freedom from bitterness. When we are grateful, we are not bound to grudges or vengeance.
>
> Even as gratitude and forgiveness are inseparable, so are ungratefulness and bitterness. When we are grateful, we see and experience life with a healthy optimism. When we lack gratitude, we move toward pessimism and even cynicism. An ungrateful heart always sees what's wrong with life. The longer we live without gratitude, the more embittered we become. If we are to enjoy lives of gratitude we must break free from the gravitational pull of bitterness."[11]

**Real Worship Leads to Real Unity**

A remarkable story of worship and unity comes from the life of Count Zinzendorf. Zinzendorf was born into a noble Pietistic family in Dresden, Germany in 1700. In 1722 he was approached by a small band of wandering Moravians to request permission to live on his lands. The Moravians were a refugee colony from Bohemia who were persecuted for their spirituality. Zinzendorf allowed them to settle in the village of Herrnhut on a corner of his estate.

In 1727 Zinzendorf devoted himself to working with the Moravians, who were seriously divided. What followed was

> … an intense and powerful experience of renewal, often described as the "Moravian Pentecost." During a communion service at Berthelsdorf, the entire congregation felt a powerful presence of the Holy Spirit, and felt their previous differences swept away. This experience began the Moravian renewal, and led to the beginning of the Protestant World Mission movement.[12]

A Moravian historian described the repentance from selfishness that filled them: "Every one desired above everything else that the Holy Spirit might have full control. Self-love and self-will, as well as all disobedience disappeared and an overwhelming flood of grace swept us all out into the great ocean of Divine Love."[13]

"On May 12, 1727, Zinzendorf addressed the community for three hours on the blessedness of Christian unity. The people sorrowfully confessed their past quarreling and promised to live in love and simplicity."

This story powerfully illustrates God's passionate desire for unity in the body of Christ. The presence of the Holy Spirit warms our hearts and moves us to discard our own self-will in favor of unity.

Loving God and loving our neighbor are two intertwined and interdependent commandments. You can't be a true worshiper without being a good neighbor and

sincere worship results in serving your neighbor and true devotion to your brother strengthens your relationship with God.

In chapters 12 through 15 of the book of Romans Paul explains how to demonstrate your devotion to God in relationships:

> Love must be sincere … Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves … Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality … Live in harmony with one another … Do not be conceited … Accept him whose faith is weak … We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up" (Rom 12:9-10, 13, 16; 14:1; 15:2).

All of these chapters flow directly out of the keynote passage on genuine worship in Romans 12:1 where we are told to give our bodies to God. The fruit of worship is the formation of a group of people that love and serve one another. Paul knows that it's going to take a lot of perseverance to do this, so after all these instructions on love, he says:

"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 15:5-6).

Recently I went to hear my daughter's choir perform in a beautiful cathedral in downtown Vancouver. There were two choirs, four gifted soloists and a volunteer orchestra that was talented, but occasionally played some sour notes. I winced as I heard the clash of dissonant notes in the orchestra. Though I enjoyed the overall performance, my musical ear was immediately drawn to the mistakes.

When the whole church is singing with "one mouth" but not with "one heart," God hears the "sour notes" in relationships. When our songs of worship are flowing but there's bitterness and brokenness instead of unity, the Holy Spirit is grieved.

After thirty-five years in the church, I know that it takes a lot of endurance to hang in there with a bunch of other Christians. I've had to forgive a lot of people and confess my sin and receive forgiveness many times. I've had to swallow my words when they've threatened the group's unity. I've had to let my vision die because other leaders haven't agreed with me.

The fruit of all of this is that I've become a little less selfish and a little more like Jesus. Isn't that what God is after in our lives? Isn't that what real worship should produce in us? This is my prayer: " … let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect" (Rom 12:2 NLT).

1. Quoted from: Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 96.
2. Quoted from Matthew Woodley, *Holy Fools: Following Jesus with Reckless Abandon* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publihers, 2008), 148.
3. Gary Kinnaman, "How Much is Enough," Vineyard Community Church, Gilbert, Arizona.
4. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline,* 97.
5. Ibid*,* 148
6. Francois Fenelon, *Christian Perfection* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishing, 1975), 34.
7. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 45
8. Erwin McManus, *Uprising: A Revolution of the Soul* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 144.
9. Beebe, *Longing for God, Seven Paths of Christian Devotion,* 58.
10. Evagrius, *The Cloud of Unknowing,* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 21.
11. McManus, *Uprising: A Revolution of the Soul, 120.*
12."Official Site of the Zinzendorf," http://www.zinzendorf.com/ (accessed September 10, 2010).
13. "Moravian Revival," http://www.evanwiggs.com/revival/history/moravian.html (accessed September 10, 2010).