

MEN OF GRACE & GRANITE
SERIES 4: UNITY IN LEADERSHIP
Study: Bringing Unity to Divided Leadership

The purpose of this session is to encourage those who are called to be leaders in the church (elders, deacons, etc.) to use the conflict in the church to produce greater unity rather than to cause factions and fractures. Although sin is inevitable among sinful leaders, it is not necessary and, in fact, it is greatly dishonoring to the Lord. The following material will discuss the causes of conflict, the responses to conflict, and the biblical principles to navigate through conflict.

Bible passages for study:

Eph 4:3	1 Cor 1:9–10	1 Pet 5:1–5
Phil 2:1–2	Matt 13:24–30	2 Cor 11:13–15
Acts 20:29–30	Rom 16:17–18	Rom 14
Jas 1:2–5	1 Tim 3:3	2 Tim 2:24–26
1 Cor 10:13	Jas 1	Phil 1
Heb 13:17	2 Tim 2:24–25	Prov 17:17
2 Thess 2:7	Rom 12:18	Col 3:13–15

The church of Jesus Christ is the most glorious living organism ever conceived in the untraceable mind of God. The church is the possession of God and the exquisite workmanship of His wise and holy character. She has been purchased with the precious blood of her Lord, the unrivaled Head of the body. She is loved and adored by every saint, who by grace alone enjoys sweet entrance and fellowship. She is fiercely hated by Satan and his fallen hosts, and continually under siege by the world, which cannot tolerate her powerful, living dynamic of sanctification unto holiness.

Her growth is divinely ordained; her endurance is superintended and assured; her ultimate perseverance and final glory cannot be shaken! She will one day bring honor and glory to Jesus Christ without stain or wrinkle, in all holiness and majesty.

For now, however, the church is not yet purified, not yet clothed in final majesty, not yet the beautiful bride of heavenly splendor. The people of God are in a daily battle with sin, locked in mortal combat in a state of perpetual, high-alert praying for grace, striving together for the faith of the gospel, and looking toward the blessed hope of the return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As the church is being purified, some seasons in the body of Christ are extremely disheartening. Appearing as lights in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation is challenge enough, but the body of Christ battles on an even greater front: to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3). Moreover, the strength of the ministry is directly commensurate with the godly unity of its leadership.

“God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor 1:9–10).

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“Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet 5:1–5).

With constant prayer, humility before God’s Word, and mutual love expressed toward one another, we must labor to preserve the unity we have in the Holy Spirit.

1. The underlying basis for all unity (Phil 2:1–2)

- a) Paul starts this treatise for unity with an appeal to grace.
- b) To preserve unity, your ministry must be saturated in grace.

“Even when unity in leadership is built on solid doctrine, it is bound to falter and ultimately fail if it lacks grace.”

- c) Division demonstrates selfishness and a lack of graciousness toward one another.
- d) Personal pride fosters this ungraciousness toward others.
 - i) Believing your opinions are always right
 - ii) Refusal to listen to others
 - iii) Pride often plagues young pastors

2. The most common causes of division among the saints

- a) Different personalities (people skills)—interpersonal friction can arise from abrasive personality differences.
- b) Different perspectives (background)—family, tradition, economics, history, status, structure, style, etc.
 - i) Individuals will view events and circumstances differently.
 - ii) Their responses are conditioned by past experiences. The same information may trigger distinctly different images and opinions in the mind.

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iii) It is possible that each perspective has a degree of validity when seen from that particular perspective.

c) Different purposes (objectives)—without an understanding of the information which led to their disagreement, a lack of support, and even open opposition can arise.

d) Different pursuits—a believer can be out of step with God on a long-term basis and thus be rebellious, bitter, and vindictive.

e) Different power—Christ tells us in Matthew 13:24–30 that wherever there is a true body of believers, Satan will plant false believers.

i) These false or pseudo-believers will work in harmony with Satan’s purpose to cause strife.

ii) “False apostles” (2 Cor 11:13–15)

iii) “Savage wolves ... not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:29–30)

Watch must be kept “on those who cause dissensions” (Rom 16:17).

3. Some common and wrong approaches to conflict among saints

a. Defensiveness

i) This posture seeks to defend self and/or others at all costs.

ii) It seeks to make sure you come out clean whatever the cost, even at the expense of biblical solutions.

b. Aggression

i) This posture primarily tries to find fault rather than to resolve the issue.

ii) It seeks to place the blame on someone else by direct or indirect implication.

c. Abdication

This happens when a leader mistakenly believes that time and a positive environment alone will resolve conflict.

4. Principles for bringing unity to a divided leadership

a) Separate biblical principles from personal preferences.

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- i) Not everything in the leadership of the church is a matter of clear biblical mandate (Rom 14).
 - ii) Where strong disagreements arise, godly leaders go to work, making clear distinctions between preferences and explicit or implicit principles which bind the conscience.
- b) Model and teach the James 1:2–5 perspective through every conflict.
- i) Leaders cannot be effective if they run from conflict. When men are being tested for leadership competence, they should demonstrate a willingness to embrace the challenge of trials in the ministry.
 - ii) No one in the leadership should be spoiling for a fight (1 Tim 3:3; 2 Tim 2:24).
 - iii) If one of your men seems to stir up strife and rather enjoys doing so, they must step away from leadership until they deal with the pride that causes it.
 - iv) On the other hand, if leaders run at the first sign of conflict, they will not only miss the sanctifying grace of trials in their own life, but they will leave the sheep vulnerable to the enemy's schemes.
 - v) Trust the promise of God (1 Cor 10:13).
 - vi) Use the trial to produce endurance (Jas 1:2–4).
- c) Maintain a focus on larger vision for the ministry.
- i) Christ and His church
 - ii) The greater progress of the gospel (Phil 1:12)
- d) Encourage everyone involved in the conflict to participate in the solution
- i) Personal examination
 - ii) Use of spiritual gifts
 - iii) Ownership of the outcome
- e) Set short- and long-term goals so that everyone can envision the fruitful outcome.
- i) Safeguards against laziness
 - ii) Forces diligent study for clearer articulation of the principles which drive solutions

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- iii) Provides for clearer communication to the sheep
- f) Build compassion for those who are driven away by friction.
 - i) A “wilderness” is sometimes needed for those who depart.
 - ii) Recognizing this helps guard against bitterness by challenging leaders to love the unlovely (2 Tim 2:24–25).
- g) Work hard at defining and maintaining unanimity within the leadership.
 - i) Spirit-led unanimity on all explicit doctrine and ministry principles
 - ii) Spirit-led humility and deference on all preferences (with a sensitivity about giftedness, strengths, and weaknesses)
- h) Admonish and, if necessary, discipline the wayward.
 - i) Maintain open access to the leadership by the congregation.
 - i) “Shepherd the flock of God among you” (1 Pet 5:2).
 - ii) “We proved to be gentle among you” (1 Thess 2:7).
 - j) Consistently develop wise leadership for the next generation.
 - k) Exercise prudent forethought in regard to significant ministry changes.
- 5. Biblical Christians are learning how to be peacemakers.
 - a) We should know how to make peace.
 - b) We should know how to diagnose the root cause of the lack of peace.
 - c) Growing to become a peacemaker is some of the hardest work one will ever do. The purpose of striving is unity (Rom 12:18; Col 3:13–15).
- 6. Principles for being a peacemaker in conflict
 - a) Christ is the Lord over the conscience (Rom 14:3–4).
 - i) Is the conflict an explicit issue in Scripture or a gray area or a preference?
 - ii) Others are not beholden to me. They either stand or fall under Christ.

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- iii) Just because someone doesn't hold our same convictions, we cannot reach the conclusion that they are less spiritual than we are.
- b) Tension can be good for your own heart.
 - i) It exposes weaknesses.
 - ii) We get sharpened in the confrontation to examine our own convictions and become more precise in their articulation.
- c) Open the Bible early in any conflict.
- d) Be haunted to be precise with God's Word and our speech. Challenge yourself to articulate your speech with painstaking clarity.
- e) "Iron sharpens iron" (Prov 27:17). How? With collision, friction and sparks.
- f) Conflict provides a challenge for my greater good and for my endurance (Jas 1:2-4).
- g) Growing in peacemaking stretches humility.