

that we may be ONE

John 17:22

It is exactly sixteen days before election day and our nation is more divided than I have ever seen in my lifetime. This political cartoon says it all.



I don't endorse anyone in the political or journalistic spectrum, but I do have a growing appreciation for Ben Shapiro. He's a conservative but I think he's a very balanced conservative. He weighed in this week on our national divide.

Our ideals divide us, too. On the one hand are "red state" Americans, steeped in traditional Judeo-Christian principles and mores — Americans who believe that our rights are God-given, and that

liberty must be balanced by traditional moral virtue. On the other hand are "blue state" Americans, steeped in egalitarian principles and mores — Americans who believe that rights spring from government, and that inequality is a more pressing concern than individual liberty, and that systems of traditional virtue merely mask hierarchical power structures.¹

Shapiro is painting with a broad brush here, but I think he got it mostly right. But would you believe we have even greater problems than this? I saw a study this week that found 48% of respondents weren't sure where chocolate milk came from. Much worse, seven percent thought chocolate milk only comes from brown cows!² Many of these people will be casting their vote on November 6th!

In the last section of his high priestly prayer, Jesus prayed for the church—the future church, including us here in 2018. The theme of this part was unity—that they may all be one. When I read it you will see that the theme of unity is dripping off the pages of Scripture as it was on the

lips of Jesus. It is his final recorded prayer for us so it has to be of the utmost importance. That doesn't make it the most important thing Jesus said, but it is a vital truth to grasp and practice.

20 "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 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. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. 24 Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. 25 O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. 26 I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

What is unity? It's easy to make a parody out of it, as Babylon Bee does with this story line: "New Study Reveals Humanity Just One 'Coexist' Bumper Sticker Away From World Peace." But the National Council of Churches doesn't think it's funny because it perfectly aligns with their goals.

There are many settings for Interreligious peace work. Within the U.S., partnerships between Christians, Jews, and Muslims helps reduce suspicion and anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic sentiment in society in a post 9/11 world. As Asia continues to grow understanding religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and others becomes increasingly important in working together to address the conflicts and disparities present in those parts of the world. NCC will seek to strengthen its current relationships and build new ones in joint efforts to work together for peace.³

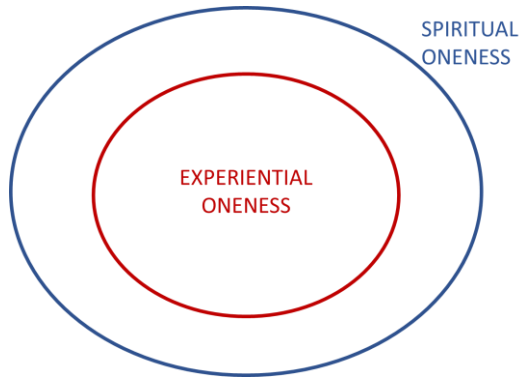
We're not going to take our cues from the National Council of Churches. Even though they are seeking unity, it is a unity at all costs, which can only come about at the expense of absolute truth.

Unity is guaranteed because the church will succeed

But what is unity, specifically Christian unity? The first thing I want you to see is that Jesus said we would be guaranteed success, in more than one sense. First, notice who he prayed for: "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word..." Those who will believe is you and me—along with everyone who has ever believed since Jesus prayed this prayer. This is the church. His church and he knew it would come to pass. The church was guaranteed to succeed. Not all would believe, but hundreds of millions have so far.

Unity is guaranteed because it was purchased with the blood of Christ

So the very existence of the church was guaranteed before it even started but the other thing that is guaranteed is our unity. Jesus is praying for unity, so that means it is something that we need to work toward. It is not yet complete and the dozens of commands to love one another forgive one another prove that we have a long way to go to achieve unity. We could call this experiential unity. This is what Jesus was praying for—that we would increasingly experience unity with all



true believers. However, there is already a true oneness that we have in Christ. You could call it a spiritual oneness. We are fully unified in Christ, through his blood. Nothing can change that. This is also a picture of a husband and wife. By virtue of their sacred marriage, they are already one flesh. Spiritually speaking, they are one, but their experience of oneness is not always so evident.

So the goal is to grow our experiential unity until it matches our spiritual unity. Unity is similar to our sanctification. As believers, we are already fully sanctified. We are made holy because we have been given the righteousness of Christ. So we are already sanctified and we are simultaneously being sanctified. In the same way, we are already fully unified, but we are also growing in our experience of unity. And this is what Jesus prayed for. In essence, that our experiential unity would match our spiritual unity.

Complete unity will not happen in this life and until then, we are hampered in our efforts toward unity by a variety of roadblocks that stand in our way. We need to identify and work to remove these roadblocks if we are to achieve the unity for which the Lord Jesus prayed.

The goal of unity is to honor Jesus and lead others to believe

This goal is stated clearly in verse 22. "I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me." This verse is where we get the song, "They'll know we are Christians by our love." Many Christians think that is its own Bible verse but in reality, it is drawn from this verse.

Let me ask you this. Have you ever known someone who became a Christian because they witnessed wonderful unity among believers? Have you ever seen that happen? I have not witnessed this myself. However, have you known people who are turned off to our precious faith because they see Christians fighting with one another? I have seen this countless times. Our lack of unity is just more glaring hypocrisy for which the watching world is disgusted. So the same barriers that impact our unity also impact our witness for Christ. It dishonors Jesus and hinders belief. This is one of the main reasons Jesus prayed for our unity.

But there are barriers to our unity—many of them, so we'll just cover a few of the biggies. First there is doctrine. Titus 2:1 says, "But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine." Sound doctrine. Doctrine is inherently divisive. It is meant to divide. If it didn't, we would all be seeking the same kind of until as the National Council of Churches. But we never want to unnecessarily divide.

I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump. I ran over and said: "Stop. Don't do it."

"Why shouldn't I?" he asked.

"Well, there's so much to live for!"

"Like what?"
"Are you religious?"
He said, "Yes."
I said, "Me too. Are you Christian or Buddhist?"
"Christian."
"Me too. Are you Catholic or Protestant?"
"Protestant."
"Me too. Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?"
"Baptist."
"Wow. Me too. Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?"
"Baptist Church of God."
"Me too. Are you original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?"
"Reformed Baptist Church of God."
"Me too. Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915?"
He said: "Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915."
I said: "Die, heretic scum," and pushed him off.

This old joke highlights the very worst of divisive doctrine. Once again I have an appreciation for our denomination in this regard. They work very hard at defining the Biblical and healthy bounds of sound doctrine without going beyond them. For example, there is a proposal to change one word in our Statement of Faith at next summer's annual conference. Here is our 9th statement. Let's read it together as we have done with two other statements recently.

We believe in the personal, bodily and ~~premillennial~~ glorious return of our Lord Jesus Christ. The coming of Christ, at a time known only to God, demands constant expectancy and, as our blessed hope, motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission.

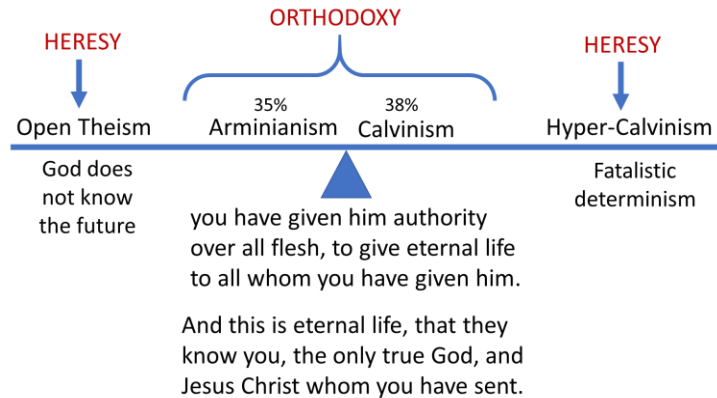
The proposal is to change one word in this statement—to delete the word premillennial and add the word glorious. Premillennial refers to the literal thousand-year reign of Christ recorded in Revelation 20.

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. 2 And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 3 and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while. 7 And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison 8 and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth

To me, this seems like a very literal 1000 years but countless believers do not take it literally, mostly because it appears in the book of Revelation, which is dripping with symbolic language. Since 1950, premillennialism has been in our statement of faith, but we have always held it very loosely. For example, if you have been through the membership class—which starts this

afternoon!—then you were told that you don't have to hold to premillennialism to be a member at Grace. That is the only thing in all ten statements where there is some wiggle room. Moreover, countless denominations and missions groups around the world do not hold to premillennialism and in an effort to work more closely with them—to be more unified with them—in 2008, the EFCA proposed removing it. However, there was enough push back that they decided to keep it in. Now ten years later they felt the time was right to set forth another proposal. And I entirely agree with this proposal. I don't know if I will ever change my mind on the topic but if I was to change my mind about something in the statement of faith, it would be premillennialism. There simply is not enough clarity in the Bible to take a hard and fast stand on it.

We must be united as much as possible. I was pretty clear about this a few weeks back when I showed you this diagram. Many Christians and denominations would divide over the middle two positions—Arminianism and Calvinism. Some will say of the other, “Die heretic,” and push the dude off the bridge. But we have said it is wrong to divide over these two. But we would divide over the two extreme positions of open theism and hyper-calvinism.



The EFCA is largely admired by the theological world for this healthy balance in our doctrine. Christianity Today ran a story in 2008.

As a denomination, there are a couple surefire ways to get your name in the headlines. You can bow to popular wisdom on a major doctrinal issue, as the Episcopal Church did in 2003 by electing an openly homosexual man as bishop. Or you can weigh in against practices near and dear to some of your fellow Christians, as the Southern Baptist Convention did two years ago.

If you want to make sure no one covers your denominational meeting, here's what you do: Revise your statement of faith before certain issues become disputed in your churches. And yet here I am writing about the Evangelical Free Church of America's newly revised statement of faith. Why? Because the time to fix your doctrine is when it isn't broke.⁴

The writer was referring to the addition to our doctrinal statement I showed you a few weeks ago which was added to exclude open theism. Or as the article said, to fix our doctrine when it isn't broken.

1. We believe in one God, Creator of all things, holy, infinitely perfect, and eternally existing in a loving unity of three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Having limitless knowledge and sovereign power,** God has graciously purposed from eternity to redeem a people for Himself and to make all things new for His own glory.

In his Systematic Theology, Wayne Grudem wrote, “The Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA) does this, for example, as a result of a “compromise” reached in 1950 when the denomination was formed from two different groups that had different views on baptism.”⁵

Someone else wrote, “For example, it is not uncommon to have young earth creationists and theistic evolutionists in the same congregation. Everyone agrees that God created the universe but differences of opinion pertain as to HOW God created or the “timing” of events.”⁶

Personally, I am pretty passionate about young earth creationism because I believe the Bible is quite clear about it, but it is not in our statement of faith. We agree to disagree. We seek unity as much as possible without sacrificing sound doctrine. As a denomination and as a church, we actually work very hard to work for unity within our doctrine. I believe this honors Jesus and is part of an answer to his prayer for unity.

Another major roadblock is interpersonal conflict, which is a broad topic. There are countless things about which we will disagree. And given the political climate at the moment, politics is just one of those areas of potential conflict. There will always be disagreements and conflict. Jesus knew this when he prayed for our unity, but what matters is how you handle the conflict that comes your way and also how you can prevent it.

Let me use an issue ripped from our national psyche—the Kavanaugh hearings. I know, I know, it’s like walking on thin ice as I’m certain to offend both sides, but humor me here. Full disclosure: I happen to agree with the Senate confirmation. I am not going to go into the details of guilt or innocence, but I do want to focus on one aspect of the case—when should abuse be reported.

Here is what I saw posted on social media and the blogosphere. I saw Christians repeatedly saying, “Well that happened 30 years ago. Why did she wait until now to suddenly report it?” In this case, I agree that the timing was suspicious. However, the insanity of the Senate hearings clouded a vital point about abuse, which is this. When the abuse is reported has absolutely no bearing on whether or not the abuse actually happened.

Case in point—the abuses within the Catholic Church. This story broke in 2002 and came to another head over the summer. The entire thing is horribly sad and I think all of us were glad to see justice accomplished, at least at some level. But did any of you ever think, “Well why did these men take 30 or 40 years to report the abuse? Why didn’t they do it as soon as it happened?” You didn’t do that because you assumed the priests were guilty. There are probably several reasons why this was true, but here’s my point. With that story, you didn’t care about the time between the abuse and the reporting of the abuse. You probably never gave it a second thought. In fact, if you followed those stories at all, you realized that after the initial story broke in the Boston Globe, tens of thousands more victims, all over the world, came forward.

When you experience abuse, you feel alone, ashamed, worthless and scared. And when the abused person hears about others coming forward, many of them finally gather up the courage to share their story with someone. They may not report it to the police or newspaper, but maybe they’ll share it with a trusted friend. But when we say things publicly—even in casual

conversation—“Well why didn’t she come forward sooner?” what we are doing is casting more blame on the victims. If a true victim hears this or reads this, they will be far less likely to share their story. The Christian community ought to be the safest place to share things like abuse or besetting sins but often they are the least safe places to talk about these. Just two days ago, the story broke about the basketball coach in Iowa who admitted to abusing over 400 boys.⁷ What if this happened in our community? Would Grace Church be a safe place? We need to be aware of what we say and how we say things. This is the nitty gritty of what loving one another looks like.

And this is just one area where we can do the opposite of working toward unity. Christians have disagreements about all sorts of things. Years ago I preached an entire sermon on how fellow believers fight one another about school choice.⁸ Should I send my kids to public school, Christian school or homeschool them? Yes. Do whatever you feel is best as long as you are taking 100% responsibility for discipling them and developing their worldview. But some believers judge each other for this decision. I have seen it from all sides. And even if you never express your opinion in public, when you hold these judgments in your heart, you place a barrier between you and the other person. You create a roadblock to the oneness for which Jesus earnestly prayed. An hour before he was arrested, Jesus prayed for our unity. The following day he shed his blood for our unity. Now we need to guard it and keep it.

Rich Maurer
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¹ <https://thenewrevere.com/2018/10/ben-shapiro-what-do-we-have-in-common/>

² <https://www.nbc4i.com/news/u-s-world/study-finds-surprising-number-of-americans-think-chocolate-milk-comes-from-brown-cows/1064794299>

³ <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/priorities/>

⁴ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2008/july/129-11.0.html>

⁵ Grudem, W. A. (2004). *Systematic theology: an introduction to biblical doctrine* (p. 983). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.

⁶ <http://freethinkingministries.com/the-efca-statement-of-faith-molinism/>

⁷ <http://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/basketball/ct-spt-iowa-youth-basketball-coach-sexual-exploitation-20181019-story.html>

⁸ http://grace-efca.worthyofpraise.org/sermons2009/philippians4_2-3.htm