



# E PLURIBUS UNA ECCLESIA

FINDING UNITY IN THE  
MISSION OF THE CHURCH

MATTHEW 28  
JOHN 17  
1 CORINTHIANS 1 & 3  
JAMES 4

JOHN CRAFT  
Regional Executive Director  
Rocky Mountain Church Network

DON'T LET IDEOLOGY DIVIDE



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## Week 1

### Day 1

"The local church is the hope of the world." Many use this quote, first popularized by Pastor Bill Hybels, to emphasize the centrality of the church's work in God's plan of salvation. When I first heard this quote, I was dismissive. I thought, "No, it's not! Jesus is." As I reflected further, however, I realized that while Jesus is the hope of the world, the world will not be able to know him unless the church fulfills its God-given mission. Andy Stanley says it well, "Jesus is the hope of the world, and the local church is the vehicle of expressing that hope to the world."<sup>1</sup> The work to which the church is called has both temporal and eternal consequences, helping people in desperate situations now and giving hope for all eternity.

Jesus' teaching indicates his people are to be active. He says, "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work."<sup>2</sup> In the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30, a man "called his servants and entrusted to them his property."<sup>3</sup> Giving one servant five talents, another three, and a third one, he then left on a journey. While he was away, the servants who received multiple talents were industrious and doubled those resources. The third servant, however, did nothing with the one talent given to him. Upon his return, the master rewarded the two servants who had increased the assets he had given to them. He then condemned and punished the third servant. However, he didn't denounce that servant for

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<sup>1</sup> This quote is universally attributed to Andy Stanley, but I couldn't find a specific reference for it.

<sup>2</sup> John 9:4. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 25:14.

not increasing his assets; instead, he condemned the servant's inactivity. He called him a "wicked and slothful servant"<sup>4</sup> and cast him out.

God's church is to be about God's work. The problem, however, is Christians often have differing views as to what that work looks like and how the church expresses the hope of Jesus. Some focus on alleviating temporary discomfort, believing the church best shows hope through charitable acts such as feeding the hungry, comforting the oppressed, and welcoming strangers. Others focus on fostering righteousness in society by voicing and promoting political or cultural viewpoints. Still others dismiss caring for temporal needs while communicating hope through the gospel, focusing on Jesus' sinless life, sacrificial death, and resurrection. To complicate matters even further, each focus can have differing viewpoints.

God's people must be active, showing love and expressing hope. However, when believers have differing opinions on what that activity should look like, disunity is often the result. In the days to come, we will uncover what God's mission for his church looks like so we may point people to the true hope of the world, Jesus.

### **Reflection**

1. Do you agree with Stanley's thought? Why or why not?
2. How do you think hope is best expressed?
3. How have you seen differing thoughts on the church's activity cause disunity?

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 25:26.

## Day 2

The multitude of differing opinions concerning the focus of the church often leads to disunity and conflict. People within congregations and church leaders believe it is necessary to convince others of the rightness of their viewpoint. However, these viewpoints are commonly rooted in foundational ideologies, meaning convincing someone his or her viewpoint needs to be changed is highly improbable, if not impossible. So, how do we find common ground if we have different viewpoints? The solution to disunity is not debate; it is, however, finding a third viewpoint that transcends your viewpoint and mine.

With so many differing viewpoints present in the church today, the only viewpoint that matters is Jesus'. The church, after all, was his idea and belongs to him. In the first recorded use of the word "church,"<sup>5</sup> Jesus doesn't refer to "the church" or "a church." He says, "I will build *my* church and the gates of hell will not overcome it." Notice how Jesus got very possessive of *his* church. Since the church belongs to him, Jesus' viewpoint is the transcendent third voice that two people with differing viewpoints can look to in order to find unity. But what does Jesus want his church to focus on? What is the mission of the church according to the One who created it and heads it?<sup>6</sup>

The answer to those questions is found in Jesus' last recorded words in the book of Matthew, commonly referred to as the Great Commission:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 16:18.

<sup>6</sup> Colossians 1:18.

them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”<sup>7</sup>

There seems to be a lot of activity in this statement, but really there’s just one command—make disciples. The mission of Jesus’ church, as well as the focus of his followers, should be to make disciples.

The problem, however, is Jesus’ followers often want to insert their own ideas about what making disciples looks like into the Great Commission. Some want to focus on instilling knowledge into others. Some think the church and believers should focus on outward acts of love. Still, others believe the Great Commission is best fulfilled through evangelistic efforts. Jesus addresses all of these thoughts by describing and modeling disciple-making. Taken together, Jesus’ actions and words give a clear picture of what disciple-making should look like so his followers can be active in doing what he wants them to do.

Jesus’ description of his church’s mission begins with baptizing. This act symbolizes one’s entrance into a relationship with God through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. The inclusion of baptism in the Great Commission indicates Jesus’ mission includes leading others to him. Jesus modeled this himself, calling people who were not following him to begin following him.<sup>8</sup>

As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him.<sup>9</sup>

While walking by the Sea of Galilee, [Jesus] saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 28:18-20.

<sup>8</sup> Roy Gruber, Lead Pastor of Washington Heights Church in Ogden, UT, explains this principle well in his yet-unpublished doctoral project.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 9:9

fisherman. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him.”<sup>10</sup>

There are many other examples of Jesus calling others to follow him. The common thread is that Jesus called people to start a relationship which then would lead to other actions. To fulfill the Great Commission, congregations and believers should follow Jesus’ example and be active in evangelistic efforts.

Jesus’ description of his church’s mission also includes teaching. To follow Jesus, believers must learn more about him, his life, and his sacrifice. If it’s necessary for people to learn, then the church has to teach. Once again, Jesus didn’t just command his followers to do this, he modeled it himself.

Again, he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered around him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. And he was teaching them many things in parables...<sup>11</sup>

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>12</sup>

While it may not be in a formal setting such as a sermon or a small group lesson, believers who are fulfilling Jesus’ mission for his church will be continually learning and communicating biblical truth.

Unfortunately, many viewpoints on disciple-making end there. However, Jesus adds another component to the mission when he says, “teaching them to *obey all that I have*

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 4:18-20. This passage also shows that as Jesus called others to follow him, he intended for them to call others to follow him as well.

<sup>11</sup> Mark 4:1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 5:1-3. The phrase “opened his mouth” indicates formal teaching or preaching. The same phrase is used in Acts 8:35 and Acts 10:34.

*commanded* you.”<sup>13</sup> The goal of disciple-making cannot be simply the transfer of information; the transfer of information should lead to a recognizable change in attitude and actions. Simply put, someone who is developing as a disciple should look more like Jesus. This was a frequent theme in Jesus’ own teaching.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments...Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me...If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”<sup>14</sup>

Paul also shows the connection between teaching and recognizable change.

The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.<sup>15</sup>

The clear voice of Jesus calling his church to make disciples through evangelism, teaching, and recognizable change cuts through the noise of competing viewpoints on what the church should be doing. Since the church belongs to him, we should pay attention to Jesus’ thoughts when we consider what the church should do. In doing that, believers with differing viewpoints can find unity through Jesus’ mission.

### **Reflection**

1. How does having a transcendent third viewpoint help address ideological conflict?
  
2. What view of disciple-making is most prevalent in your church? In your own view?

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<sup>13</sup> Matthew 28:20.

<sup>14</sup> John 14:15, 21, 23.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Timothy 1:5.

3. Which area of disciple-making (evangelism, teaching, recognizable change) do you need to emphasize more? What can you do to emphasize it?



### Day 3

What would you do if you knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, you had less than six weeks to live? Some people would fill those days with “bucket list” items, traveling to new places and having new experiences. Most, however, would focus on the things that are important to them, spending time with family and making sure the ones they love the most have an opportunity to respond to the gospel. When time is short, it clarifies our intentions and guides our decisions. We focus on life’s most important details.

The Great Commission is located at a very crucial moment in Jesus’ earthly ministry. As he gathers his followers on a mountain in Galilee, he is in the 40 days between his resurrection and his ascension. Time is short, so Jesus focuses on what’s most important for his followers to know. In fact, the Great Commission recorded in Matthew 28 is just one of several instructions to his followers about what he wants them to do after he leaves.

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”<sup>16</sup>

And [Jesus] said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.”<sup>17</sup>

Then [Jesus] opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus is it written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew 28:18-20.

<sup>17</sup> Mark 16:15. While some manuscripts do not include the final portion of Mark, this verse reflects teaching found elsewhere.

<sup>18</sup> Luke 24:45-47.

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”<sup>19</sup>

[Jesus] said to them... “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”<sup>20</sup>

You may read these and think, “Those are just different accounts of the same teaching.”

When you pay attention to the details, however, you’ll see that Jesus came back to the same topic time and again following his resurrection. Paul Borthwick points out how this communicates the importance of the Great Commission:

Jesus gave these commissions in various times and settings. Matthew’s is definitely in Galilee; Mark’s is in either Jerusalem or Bethany; Luke’s is definitely in Jerusalem and the Acts account is definitely in Bethany; John’s is in Jerusalem, but the wording is completely different from all of the other statements. John’s record occurs on Easter night immediately after the resurrection, and Jesus’ words in Acts 1:8 immediately precede his ascension. The other statements occur over those 40 days...In light of the fact that we have very little post-resurrection material, the fact that these instructions appear several times underscores their importance.<sup>21</sup>

While the importance of the Great Commission in Jesus’ teaching is difficult to deny, it often does not take a prominent place in the viewpoint of Jesus’ followers when they think about how they should live and what the church should be doing. When the Great Commission has greater prominence in our lives and ministries, it’s easier to listen to Jesus’ voice rather than the competing voices demanding our attention.

### **Reflection**

1. What is the outcome when the Great Commission is not our central focus?

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<sup>19</sup> John 20:21.

<sup>20</sup> Gorman, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Borthwick, *Great Commission, Great Compassion: Following Jesus and Loving the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 30.

2. There are good activities that can take the place of the Great Commission. What are some of the good things that can distract us from making disciples?

3. How can you make the Great Commission more important?



## Day 4

Who is responsible for carrying out the Great Commission? Some would confine the responsibility to the disciples standing on the mountain in Matthew 28, making the end of that gospel a conversation between Jesus and his followers as he gives instructions for the immediate future. Some restrict the responsibility for the Great Commission to church leaders—pastors, elders, deacons, and ministry leadership. This may not be a conscious restriction, but rather people placing expectations on church leadership to do the work of the church. As you look more closely at the Great Commission, however, you'll find that Jesus gives a mission that a handful of people would not be able to fulfill. As you reread Matthew 28:18-20, notice how many times Jesus uses all-encompassing words.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."<sup>22</sup>

All authority. All nations. All that I have commanded you. I am with you always. These phrases show that Jesus has more than 11 people in mind to reach the world after he would return to heaven. These phrases show that Jesus wants more people involved in fulfilling the Great Commission than just the leadership of your church. All, all, all, and always include you.

Jesus begins the description of his mission for his church by declaring that he had been given "all authority in heaven and on earth." He says he's been given what it will take to overwhelm the gates of hell.<sup>23</sup> He's just confirmed that by defeating death by raising again after being killed on one of the symbols of the greatest power on earth—a Roman cross. Now, based

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<sup>22</sup> Matthew 28:18-20.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 16:18

on his universal authority and power, he tells his followers, both those standing on the mountain and those throughout the ages, to continue his work.

That work includes making disciples of all nations. The 11 remaining disciples couldn't do that. Your church leaders can't do that. But as all Christians make disciples while they are going about their lives—one way to understand the beginning of the Great Commission—people in every nation can be reached by the gospel, learn who Jesus is, and have lives changed by the power of the Holy Spirit. You are always going. You go to church, you go to school, you go to the gym, you go to work, you go to family gatherings, and you go around your neighborhood. Fulfilling the Great Commission means that you are going in the name and power of Jesus, the One who received all authority and is sending you.

Jesus instructs us to make disciples by “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” In another all-encompassing phrase, Jesus tells us that every word he spoke was important. They are all necessary for people to follow him. Once again, Jesus gives a task that cannot be fulfilled by a privileged or educated few. It can only be accomplished as all his followers continually learn about him and tell others about him.

Finally, Jesus gives an incredible promise that shows that the Great Commission is your call as well as the Eleven's. Jesus says, “And behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Jesus didn't just give eleven guys instructions and leave; he gave all his followers for all time instructions and then promises to be with them. That promise is just as true now as it was on a mountain in Galilee. The age hasn't ended. Jesus hasn't returned yet. But he is present with each of his followers as they fulfill his universal call to make disciples.

### **Reflection**

1. How have you let others do what Jesus calls you to do?

2. Whom will you be able to reach for the gospel that no one else can?

3. What does Jesus' promise to be with you mean for you? How will you follow him knowing that he is with you?



## Day 5

The eleven men who stood on a mountain in Galilee and received the Great Commission were a ragtag bunch. They had a lot of rough edges, some of which they carried even after spending time walking with Jesus. James and John were so prone to anger they were called the “sons of thunder.” If you read between the lines, you can see a rivalry between Peter and John. As John records Jesus’ resurrection, he recounts his and Peter’s journey to the empty tomb.

So Peter went out with the other disciple,<sup>24</sup> and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.<sup>25</sup>

This is John, a member of Jesus’ inner circle of disciples, recounting the pivotal event of all eternity. Under the guidance and influence of the Holy Spirit, he is writing the Word of God that will endure forever. And he wants you to know that he could run faster than Peter!

This rivalry went both ways. After Jesus’ resurrection, he had a conversation with Peter on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. As Jesus tells Peter what a life following him will hold, Peter asks a telling question.

Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during supper and had said, “Lord, who is it who will betray you?” When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about this man?”

Peter seems to be just as concerned with what John is going to get as he is how his own life will end. While the source of this rivalry is uncertain, it continued through Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection.

Peter and John’s differences weren’t the only differences present in Jesus’ followers. They came from widely differing backgrounds. Matthew was a tax collector who worked for the

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<sup>24</sup> John doesn't name himself in his gospel.

<sup>25</sup> John 20:3-4.

Roman Empire. Simon was a Zealot, a group who actively sought to overthrow Roman rule. Many were rough fishermen and came from lower-class backgrounds. According to Luke 8:2-3, there were women who followed Jesus who were wealthy enough they provided for Jesus' ministry "out of their means." These women included "Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager," meaning they were a couple with wealth and authority.

This incredibly diverse group with varying backgrounds and ideologies changed the world. They preached from western Greece to Egypt to India. They stood before kings and boldly declared the gospel. All the eleven disciples gave their lives for Jesus' sake, except for John, who was exiled to the island of Patmos for preaching about Jesus. This varied group came together and fulfilled one mission, the one Jesus gave them. If the church is to fulfill the Great Commission—if *you* are to fulfill the Great Commission—we must follow the example of those who've gone before us. We have to set aside our differences—ideological, sociological, political, or personal—and focus on the mission Jesus gave to us. We may never agree on some important things in life, but we should be able to agree that you and I are called to make disciples of all nations. If we focus on the one thing that Jesus calls us to do, all the little things we might think are important will fade into the background.

### **Reflection**

1. How have differences (ideological, sociological, political, or personal) hindered you from fulfilling the Great Commission?
2. How can you overcome those differences?
3. Who can be your partner in making disciples? How will you start?

## Week 2

### Day 1

What if God prayed for you? What would that look like? What would burden the Creator of the universe so much that he would take the time to pray specifically for you? It can be an overwhelming thought to consider what the Eternal One would pray when he thought about you, your life, and your experiences. However, we don't have to guess when we answer this question. The answer is recorded in John 17.

In what's commonly known as the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus, we catch a glimpse of Jesus' conversation with the Father. It takes place on the night of the Last Supper. Judas has left to betray Jesus. The disciples share a Passover meal together. Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper, a way for his followers to remember his pending death, burial, and resurrection until he comes again. He tells the disciples a little bit about the future. He teaches a lot about the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells the disciples what it means to love and follow him. And then he prays.

The prayer is notable for what it includes and what it excludes. It includes a lot of prayer concerning the glory of the Father. Jesus wants him to be made larger than anything else by the way his earthly life will come to an end. It excludes any thought about removing the disciples from the world. Jesus prays out loud, "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one."<sup>26</sup> I know I don't spend a lot of time clarifying what I'm *not* praying for. Why would Jesus? There's a simple answer—they had a job to do. Remember the Great Commission? The disciples couldn't fulfill that if they were no longer in the world. Jesus

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<sup>26</sup> John 17:15.

is reminding them of the important work that lies ahead of them by specifically excluding their departure from the world as he prays.

Jesus prays for some other things for his disciples that we'll uncover as this week continues. But Jesus makes another important clarification.

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word.<sup>27</sup>

Jesus says that he is not simply praying for those in the room that night. He's not just praying for the eleven who would stand on a mountain in Galilee and receive the Great Commission. He's not only praying for the ones who would travel the known world and give their lives for his sake. He's praying for all those who would believe in him through their words. This prayer includes you and me. We have believed because Peter, John, and Matthew wrote their experiences down. We have believed because Paul's life was changed by Jesus, he learned from the apostles, and he wrote letters to churches. The testimony of those who saw Jesus in the flesh has led us to believe.

So, Jesus prayed for you two thousand years ago. On the night he was going to be betrayed, arrested, put on trial, and crucified he took time to name you in his prayer. Which means we should pay attention to what he prays for. His prayer for you and me boils down to two things: unity and mission. When this prayer is fulfilled in his church today, the gates of hell cannot stand against it. How should we live this out? How can we be the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer?

### **Reflection**

1. How are God's glory, the Great Commission, and the church's unity linked?

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<sup>27</sup> John 17:20.

2. What words of the disciples help you to believe in Jesus?
  
3. Take a moment and thank Jesus for thinking specifically of you. How does the personalization of Jesus' prayer change the way you view John 17?



## Day 2

Churches often get a bad reputation for experiencing conflict and infighting. Oftentimes, this reputation is deserved. Many people, maybe including you, have been hurt by believers who treat others poorly because they have a different viewpoint. It's not hard to find YouTube videos created by Christians who are denouncing other Christians because they don't appreciate their doctrine, philosophy, or approach. There are whole channels dedicated to tearing other Christians down. There are believers who have ministries built on "taking a stand" against other ministries or teachers. And there are ministries that are built on "taking a stand" against them. It is pretty apparent that the same discord and strife that is present in culture is present in the church. I'm not certain that's what Jesus wants.

In fact, Jesus prayed just the opposite in John 17. As we consider a few passages from this incredible prayer, remember that Jesus isn't just praying for those in the room. Jesus isn't simply caring for his closest friends on earth. He specifically prays for all believers everywhere when he says, "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word."<sup>28</sup> As noted yesterday, Jesus' prayer comes down to two big topics: unity and mission.

Look at how often Jesus prays for the unity of his church.

And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.<sup>29</sup>

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...<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> John 17:20.

<sup>29</sup> John 17:11.

<sup>30</sup> John 17:20-21.

The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one...<sup>31</sup>

The God of the universe prays for the unity of his people three times in this short prayer. You probably repeat prayers for things that are really important to you—a pressing health need, a situation for which you need wisdom, the spiritual state of a loved one. Jesus' prayer was no different. When he prayed, he prayed for the things that were most important to him, including the unity of his people. As we'll see in the days to come, we don't have unity because we agree on every aspect of life; we can have unity because we agree on the most important aspects of life—who Jesus is and what he calls us to do.

### **Reflection**

1. Have you been hurt by other believers? How did that affect your view of Jesus? Of the church? Of yourself?
2. Have you hurt another believer in the name of "taking a stand?" What can you do to move toward unity?
3. How does agreeing on who Jesus is and what he wants us to do allow believers to have unity, even if they don't agree on everything?

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<sup>31</sup> John 17:22-23.

### Day 3

Not to get all metaphysical on you, but we are bound by time. We put everything into the perspective of beginnings and endings. We book airline tickets based on when they take off and land, at least if everything goes to plan. When things don't go to plan and departure and arrival times change, frustration mounts because our timing changes. A quick glance at your smart speaker history shows how bound by time we are. "Alexa, what time is it?" is followed closely by, "Alexa, what's the weather," because we want to know what we can accomplish that day. Toss in the commands to start timers and it's easy to see beginnings, endings, and circumstances dominating our thought life.

This temporal perspective can create angst in relationships sometimes. As we consider our opinions in light of the opinions of the people around us, we can get concerned that our perspective is losing while others are winning. Since we only have a limited amount of time in these relationships, we may be tempted to seek to win an argument and be proven right rather than focus on something more meaningful and lasting. Jesus' prayer in John 17 gives us some insight into Jesus' perspective on his most important relationship and how that empowered his mission. If we can develop the same perspective as Jesus, maybe that will empower our mission as well.

Jesus, as the second Person of the Trinity—God the Son—had a perfect relationship with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit for all eternity. We'll never be able to fully grasp this (a symptom of our finiteness) but grasping what we can helps us to understand how Jesus' mission was empowered by the unity of the Trinity. Here are some things Jesus prays that give us insights into Jesus' eternal perspective.

I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.<sup>32</sup>

Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.<sup>33</sup>

The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one...<sup>34</sup>

Jesus' perspective reaches much farther than ours. He understands his relationship with the Father not in terms of time, but eternity. And, for all of eternity, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have been perfectly united in purpose: increasing the glory of God through accomplishing the mission of providing salvation for His people.

That purpose was empowered by the unity of the Trinity. Jesus realized this through his eternal perspective. You can see this as John introduces the scene of the Last Supper.

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given him all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper.<sup>35</sup>

Jesus didn't allow temporal perspectives, betrayal, or pain to derail his mission. Rather, he was empowered by the eternal unity of the Trinity. As the ones following Jesus, we should follow his example and allow our perspective to be stretched beyond beginnings and endings, schedules and timers. Then, Jesus' prayer can be fulfilled in us: "That they may be one, just as you Father are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> John 17:4-5.

<sup>33</sup> John 17:11.

<sup>34</sup> John 17:22-23.

<sup>35</sup> John 13:1-3.

<sup>36</sup> John 17:21.

### **Reflection**

1. How have you allowed your perspective to be too short?
2. How has a shortened perspective impacted your ability to fulfill the Great Commission?
3. How has a temporal perspective impacted your relationships, either with believers or with people who need to know Jesus?



## Day 4

Remember the quote by Andy Stanley, “Jesus is the hope of the world, and the local church is the vehicle of expressing that hope to the world?” Yes, Jesus is the hope of the world. Yes, the local church is the vehicle of expressing that hope. One of those statements is unconditional. Jesus is the hope of the world. That will never change. The One who is the same yesterday, today, and forever<sup>37</sup> has always been and will always be the hope of the world. The other statement, however, is conditional. While the local church is the vehicle of expressing the hope of Jesus, there are times it succeeds and times it fails at its responsibility. Sometimes the church does a great job of communicating hope. Other times it fails, sometimes spectacularly. What makes the difference? Why does it succeed at times and fail at others?

Once again, Jesus’ prayer in John 17 provides the answer to these questions. Since the content of Jesus’ prayer for you and me focuses largely on unity and mission, it’s not surprising that he ties the unity of his followers with people understanding that he was sent by God to be the hope of the world.

For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup>

That they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Hebrews 13:8.

<sup>38</sup> John 17:8.

<sup>39</sup> John 17:20-21.

<sup>40</sup> John 17:23.

O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me.<sup>41</sup>

Jesus, the One sent by God, will always be the hope of the world perfectly. He fulfilled his mission perfectly. He saves his people perfectly. He will bring his people home perfectly. His followers, on the other hand, are imperfect sometimes. We can be divisive. We can focus on our own agendas rather than on our mission. When we allow our differences to overtake the Great Commission, we do not express the hope of the world well. Jesus' followers need to be one, so that the world will know that Jesus came to be their perfect hope.

### **Reflection**

1. Have you seen disunity hinder the church's ability to express the hope of the world? What happened?
2. How can Jesus' followers express his hope more perfectly?
3. How are the unity of the Trinity and the unity of the church related?

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<sup>41</sup> John 17:25.

## Day 5

Jesus came to earth to accomplish everything the Father had for him to do. He did that perfectly and returned to heaven. The completion of his mission was the single-most important moment in all of eternity as he lived, died, and rose again. Just before completing that mission, securing salvation for God's people, he prayed for his followers. In this prayer, he compares his mission with the mission that he is giving to his followers, which he'll give to them about a month and a half after dying on the cross. In this comparison, the two themes of Jesus' prayer, unity and mission, come together. The fulfillment of this confluence is what allows Jesus' promise in Matthew 16 to come to pass—"I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not stand against it."<sup>42</sup>

As we've seen, Jesus ties the unity of the Trinity with the fulfillment of his own mission to bring salvation to the world. Over and over, he reflects on the oneness seen in the Trinity, praying things such as

I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.<sup>43</sup>

And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.<sup>44</sup>

Jesus acknowledges that his mission was empowered by the unity of the Trinity. The relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was the driving force behind Jesus accomplishing all

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<sup>42</sup> Matthew 16:18.

<sup>43</sup> John 17:4-5.

<sup>44</sup> John 17:11.

that the Father sent him to do. Each person of the Trinity was united in executing the plan for salvation that had been set in motion before the world was created.<sup>45</sup>

Jesus doesn't stop by reflecting on his own mission, however. He prays about our mission, the Great Commission.

I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.<sup>46</sup>

Don't miss the enormity of what Jesus just prayed. God the Father sent God the Son empowered by God the Holy Spirit to accomplish his eternal plan for mankind. Jesus says he's sending you and me in the same way. What does this mean? First, we are being sent by Jesus to fulfill our role in bringing salvation to the world. For Jesus this meant living, dying, and raising again. For us it means as we are going, we make disciples by pointing them to Jesus, teaching them about him, and helping them to experience transformational life-change. Second, mission fulfillment and unity cannot be separated. For Jesus, his mission was affirmed and empowered by the unity of the Trinity. For us, our mission is affirmed and empowered by the unity of Jesus' followers. If Jesus' church is divided because of political ideologies or cultural differences, we will not be able to fulfill the mission to which we've been called. That prevents us from accomplishing the third and overarching manner in which Jesus sends us as he was sent. The point of fulfilling the mission, both Jesus' and ours, is God's glory. Jesus prayed, "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do."<sup>47</sup> By going as Jesus came, by having unity as

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<sup>45</sup> Ephesians 1:4.

<sup>46</sup> John 17:15-17.

<sup>47</sup> John 17:5.

the Trinity is united, and making disciples as Jesus made disciples, we glorify God and fulfill our mission by pointing people to him.

### **Reflection**

1. In what ways should the church have the same unity as the Trinity?
2. How is your mission similar to Jesus'?
3. How does disunity among Jesus' followers prevent us from fulfilling our mission?



### Week 3

#### Day 1

Hopefully, by now you've realized the importance of the church's mission. Jesus taught about it multiple times between his resurrection and ascension, using precious limited time on earth to communicate about what he wanted his followers to do after he left. Jesus prayed about it on the night he was betrayed. As the Creator of the universe prepared to go to the cross to secure salvation for his people, he was so burdened for his followers, including you and me, that he lifted this concern to the Father. While we remain on earth, our central thought should be on how we are fulfilling the Great Commission. In that way, we emulate Jesus and his concern for his mission for his church.

Unfortunately, Jesus' concern for unity often goes unnoticed in the church today. We are prone to fight and argue. We hold political ideologies so tightly that we are dismissive of believers who don't see the world the same way we do. We, either intentionally or unintentionally, subject our theology and practice of Christianity to our political or cultural ideals. This was plainly seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, with disputes about how the church should react, the ways we should interact with governmental authorities, and what was important for the church to do. As one pastor put it, "We found that our people were much more politically disciplined than biblically disciplined."

What does it look like when Jesus' church doesn't get along? What happens when believers allow their political ideologies to take over the way they view the world, the way they treat people outside the church, the way they treat other believers, or even the way they worship? To be honest, it doesn't look very good. The outcomes are not positive, either for the church or the world that needs the church to express the hope of Jesus correctly and adequately. This week,

we'll explore what some of the writers of the New Testament had to say about the impact of disunity on a congregation and its ability to be obedient to the Great Commission. Along the way, we'll see the importance of focusing on Jesus' mission for his church rather than political or ideological convictions, no matter how deeply held.

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth extensively about divisions. They had multiple factions that caused the church problems serious enough that Paul addressed it several times in very serious terms.

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers.<sup>48</sup>

James addressed the impact of disunity as well.

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?<sup>49</sup>

Realizing the damage caused by disunity will help you and me do what we can to follow Jesus in fulfilling the Great Commission together.

### **Reflection**

1. How have you seen political tensions spill over into the church?
  
2. Are you more biblically or politically disciplined? How can you focus on biblical discipleship more?

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<sup>48</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:10-11.

<sup>49</sup> James 4:1.

3. Pray that God would reveal the ways in which your thoughts about church and spirituality have been influenced by ideologies rather than the other way around.



## Day 2

It's hard to miss the ideological divide today. If you've missed it, you can do one of the following to find it: open a social media app, turn on the television, go on the internet, talk to someone who isn't yourself. You know, go ahead and talk to yourself and you might find an ideological divide there as well. It's tempting to think that we live in unprecedentedly divisive times, with rancor and discord everywhere we turn. While it may feel that way, we must remember that ever since Adam blamed Eve for eating the fruit, there has been division among us. That's one reason the apostle Paul spent so much time writing about division and unity to a church in a city called Corinth. Reading these passages, you'd be tempted to think that they had found an early version of Twitter that had filled their feeds with vitriol. What you find is that we don't need Twitter, Facebook, Fox News, or MSNBC to create division; we're pretty good at that on our own.

In the two letters in the New Testament written to the Corinthians, Paul addresses ideological differences right from the beginning. This may indicate that the primary issue in the church was the presence of factions and strife.

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?<sup>50</sup>

It's interesting to note that the Greek word translated "divisions" in this passage doesn't necessarily have a negative meaning. It can simply imply a difference of opinion. However, when taken to the extreme, those differences of opinion can create destructive divisions. In the

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<sup>50</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:10-13.

church, this happens when our ideologies take a higher priority than our theology. This was the case in Corinth. Paul calls out those who were claiming to follow Apollos or Peter. There was nothing wrong with Apollos' or Peter's theology. In fact, Paul commends both men later in his letter, saying the Corinthians would do well to listen to them.<sup>51</sup>

The problem is not that we have different opinions. The problem is not that we have different ways of viewing the world. The problem is not that we don't all think the same way. The church is supposed to have people from all different walks of life in it. The very fact that Paul had to write so much about unity is a reflection of diversity in the body of Christ. However, when we allow our focus to shift to earthly ideologies at the expense of unity in the church, we are acting less like followers of Jesus and more like followers of men. Paul calls out the Corinthians for this very unspiritual perspective.

For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?"<sup>52</sup>

Pay attention to two things here. First, disunity in the Corinthian church was caused by believers not accepting other believers who followed the teaching of a different teacher. Second, this disunity happened because believers weren't acting spiritually. Paul's question, "are you not...behaving only in a human way?" should cause you and I to step back, reflect on our words and attitudes toward other believers, and seek the unity of Jesus' church through truly focusing on what's important to him: unity, mission, and God's glory.

### **Reflection**

1. Why do you think it's so easy to act in a human way rather than spiritually?

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<sup>51</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:11; 16:12.

<sup>52</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:3-4

2. How ideologically diverse is your local congregation? How has diversity caused problems?

How has a lack of diversity caused problems?

3. How has “acting in a human way” crept into your treatment of other believers?



## Day 3

“Why does this keep happening to me?” This was the exasperated cry of a believer whose church was experiencing severe disunity. She was traumatized by the stress, the discord, the disagreements, the backbiting, the politicking, the gossip, the factions, the nitpicking, the canceling, the broken relationships, the spiritual deadness, the lack of worship, the absence of fellowship...you get the point. Things were not going well, and everybody knew it. Nearly in tears, this believer communicated how difficult it was to experience this in Jesus’ church. However, in many ways, she was in the middle of the dispute that caused the disunity to arise. Then she added a couple of sentences that have stuck with me throughout my ministry journey. She said, “This is the third church in a row I’ve attended that split! Why does this keep happening to me?”

I don’t think this believer thought she was actively causing disunity. However, while passionately arguing for her ideology, she would appear oppositional and dismissive of believers who had a different viewpoint. Pain, frustration, and disillusionment were the result for many in this congregation. Conversations were heated. Meetings were contentious. No one was having fun. Disunity never leads to pleasant things. Watch for the descriptors in the following passages.

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers.<sup>53</sup>

For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving in only a human way?<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:10-11.

<sup>54</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:3.

What causes quarrels and what causes fights within you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.<sup>55</sup>

Quarreling. Divisions. Jealousy. Strife. Fights. War. Murder. Covet. Sounds like fun, right? Sounds like a place you want to be, right? However, many of us don't realize the way we act, the words we use, and the attitudes of our heart are what cause the environments that cause us pain, sorrow, and disappointment. This is not unique to our situation today; it was the same in the churches that received Paul's and James' letters. The causes of disunity are not outside of us. Rather, they come from within. James writes about the passions and attitudes "within you." When you think about the disunity you see in the church and the unpleasant environment it creates, don't immediately start blaming everyone around you who sees things differently. Instead, take a step back and examine the passions within you. You might find that you have a role in the very thing you dislike, which means part of the solution lies in you.

### **Reflection**

1. Have you ever felt like the believer experiencing disunity and wondering why? Where was your focus during that time?
  
2. Why is it easy for us to ignore our role in disunity?
  
3. How can you communicate passion in a way that isn't oppositional or dismissive?

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<sup>55</sup> James 4:1-2.

## Day 4

The gospel focuses a lot on reconciliation. God reconciled sinners to himself when Jesus died on the cross and rose again. Those sinners were far from God; they're described as dead, enemies of God, and separated from him. However, through Jesus believers are made alive, friends of God, and brought near to him. This is the most incredible reconciliation possible. Those who offended an infinitely perfect God, meaning their offense was infinitely objectionable and painful, are brought into the family of the very God they wronged. This is the heart of the plan of salvation. This is the outworking of the eternal plan of God. It cost the Father the life of the Son to make this happen. It would be an understatement to say that reconciliation is important to God. He is in the business of bringing those who are far apart close together.

This doesn't simply happen between God and sinners. It happens between sinners and sinners. Those who lived in opposition and animosity toward each other are brought into the same family. Those who have different backgrounds and histories become one. Paul describes shows how our reconciliation with God and our reconciliation with each other are accomplished through Jesus.

[R]emember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.<sup>56</sup>

We were once separated, from God and each other. Paul is writing specifically about Jews and Gentiles here, but even those completely oppositional groups were brought together through the

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<sup>56</sup> Ephesians 2:12-16.

death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. God loves reconciliation. God loves unity. He paid an incredible price to make it happen.

So how does he feel about the times his people don't live that out? How does he react when his people allow ideologies to separate what he has brought together? You might be able to guess. As Calvin Coolidge said when asked about what a preacher said about sin, "He's against it." Several of the passages that address disunity show God's displeasure with it. In fact, those passages don't stop at describing his displeasure, they describe his judgment. James writes about the root of disunity within us and describes God's attitude.

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?... You adulterous people, do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.<sup>57</sup>

God has done everything possible to reconcile sinners to himself and sinners to sinners.

However, we often fail to act spiritually, using the tactics of the world to advance our ideologies.

When that causes disunity, we are acting as enemies of God as we are actively subverting what he has accomplished through Jesus' sacrifice.

Paul is actually a little harsher in the way he describes God's response to disunity in Jesus' church. In an often-misunderstood passage, Paul writes

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.<sup>58</sup>

This passage is misunderstood in that people connect the temple referred to with 1 Corinthians 6:

"Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit."<sup>59</sup> This connection has led some to believe that

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<sup>57</sup> James 4:1, 4.

<sup>58</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:16-17.

<sup>59</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:19.

suicide is an unforgivable sin, because God will destroy the one who destroys the temple. However, that's not what Paul is writing about in 1 Corinthians 3. Instead of looking forward three chapters, Paul is referring to something he was writing earlier. He got distracted in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. That's an aside describing how one builds his or her life on the foundation of Jesus Christ. Paul was distracted because he wrote about the Corinthians, "For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building."<sup>60</sup>

When Paul writes about the destruction of a temple, he's not writing about an individual's body. Paul is writing about the Corinthian church, the one that has jealousy and strife because people were holding to ideologies rather than focusing on unity and mission. That disunity was destroying the church, which would bring the judgment of God. If God values reconciliation so highly and judges disunity so harshly, shouldn't we place the same value on unity? If we care about Jesus' church and mission, unity should be one of our highest priorities.

### **Reflection**

1. What are the implications of reconciliation of sinners and God? Of sinners and sinners?
  
2. How does the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles relate to the reconciliation in churches today?
  
3. What might be some of the ways God's judgment of disunity is seen today?

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<sup>60</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:9.



## Day 5

Disunity destroys. Surveys of church leaders show it. Surveys of church members show it. Anecdotes show it. Experiences show it. Conversations show it. Disunity hinders the most important thing the church is supposed to do, fulfill the Great Commission. It has caused churches to take the energy they need to do what Jesus has called them to do and use it to address conflict, self-righteousness, and self-centeredness instead. Disunity causes pain in congregations, making it difficult for believers to find fellowship, experience worship, and be disciplined. It has damaged congregations, with people leaving churches because they disagree with the ideological stances of church leaders or the ideological stances of other church members. Disunity causes pain in individuals, as they experience the stress, disappointment, and disillusionment that come when relationships are broken.

This doesn't have to be the case. From the beginning of this study, we've seen that God calls all believers everywhere to the same purpose. We are supposed to glorify him by making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We're supposed to teach them everything that Jesus commanded us. And Jesus promises to be with us always as we do that. When we focus on that mission, ideological differences can begin to fade. It doesn't mean that we don't have sincerely held beliefs or view the world in a way we think is correct; it means that the differences we have can fade when we focus less on our differences and more on the mission that Jesus has called us to fulfill.

This takes more than we have within us. We want to be right. We want our perspectives, our viewpoints, to be proven correct. We want the satisfaction of being on the winning side of the argument, so we will naturally argue with all our might. In and of ourselves, we'll fight for the winning spot and be oppositional and dismissive of others along the way. That's why Jesus

prayed for us on his way to face the most desperate events anyone has ever faced, so desperate that thinking of them made him sweat blood. In the face of that, he prayed for you and me to have unity and fulfill our mission. The God of the universe cared so much for our unity that he didn't pray for himself and the incredible pain, suffering, and separation he was about to face. Rather, he prayed for his followers to get along, to not let differences divide them, and—most importantly—to have the unity that would empower them to do what he called them to do.

God cares so much about our unity that he has a strong reaction to disunity. He cares so much about his church that he will destroy those who destroy the body. Scripture, over and over, addresses the wrongness of fighting over ideologies and the rightness of uniting in the gospel. When believers understand this more and more and unite for the sake of the gospel, the church of Jesus Christ will be an unstoppable force for good, both temporal and eternal. The church will continue to move forward, making disciples of all nations as it goes. And the gates of hell will not be able to withstand its advance. May God give you and me the eyes of faith to see that God has so much more in store for us than winning an ideological argument. He wants to change lives through us. He wants to change eternities through us. He wants to build his church through us. Let's do that...together.

### **Reflection**

May God bless you as you embark on a journey of seeking unity in the face of disunity. My hope and prayer for you is that you would recognize the enormity of what God has called us to do and be willing to set aside every difference possible in order to do it. Take a moment and reflect on what you've learned and consider how you'll seek to bring unity instead of disunity by focusing on the mission God has for us rather than the differences that divide us.



Everyone has an ideology--the way they view the world.  
That's not the problem.

The problem is those ideologies sometimes take charge  
not of just the way we view the world, but the way we  
view the purpose of the church. Overcoming this  
tendency is crucial for churches to experience unity and  
fulfill their mission--the Great Commission.

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