

Text: Jn.17:23

My purpose for this message: To depict the glory of unity that believers might begin to pray for it.  
Delivered: Jan. 25, 2004 @ KEFC by Keith Rohrer

## The Normal Church

### PRAY.

Follow a team throughout its losing season and you might see things like this:

- Quarterback yells at the wide receiver when he comes back to the huddle
- Running back tell off the lineman who blew the block
- The corner and safety each blame the other after an onfield collision.
- After a meaningless score, just one teammate claps the receiver on the back while others ignore him.
- On the sidelines the defensive coach rants at the tackle who jumped offsides. The tackle waves him off and walks away.
- After the game, players at microphones blame teammates for missed assignments, bad attitudes, and hope out loud to be traded.

Actually, this does not describe a team; it describes a group of overpaid individuals with huge egos and personal agendas. Unity will be required to change their win-loss ratio; unity will be required before they become a powerhouse again.

Same is true in the church. I believe that after truth, the most important factor in any church is unity. Without God-given unity, there is only chaos and weakness—even if your doctrine is correct. All across this nation are Bible-believing churches that are dying or ineffective because they are marked by disunity. For from unity comes spiritual power. Unity is the mark of the normal church. Find Jn.17:21, 23. Did you know that shortly before Jesus died, He specifically prayed for Keystone Church? He prayed for Himself, he prayed for His disciples, then He prayed for us. READ Jn.17:21, [23].

This morning I want to give you 6 marks of unity and then the main way we become unified. Jesus prayed that the church would be as united as He and the Father were. That the Church (not all Christians worldwide, but those in a particular local church, local congregation) would be One. Not just that we'd all be one from different denominations, but that the people in each *particular* church would be one with each other.

What's a normal church look like? What characteristics do other believers *and* the lost notice?

1. **Visiting & Fellowship:** In a normal church, people enjoy each other's company; they like to get together....

- a. Individually, with another person, another couple, another family.

They get together for a meal, for dessert, go to a ball game together, babysit for someone else, have someone from your son's SS class over to play for a day, or have friends over for a super bowl party.

- b. Corporately such as with a CONNECTION group, a church picnic or other event, or even special meetings at the church. The early church was together constantly and thought it was normal. Many American Christians get together an hour or

two a week and think *that's* normal. *They devoted themselves to... the fellowship.* Acts 2:42

2. **Assistance:** In a normal church, people help each other....

There are some jobs we can do ourselves, some we can't. Right now I'm refinishing my hutch and I don't want anyone else to touch it. I have finishing standards that may be..., *different* from yours I want to do the job solo even if it *takes* me until the return of Christ! But one of these days I'm thinking about building a shed or small barn and I just might ask one of you to help. Church neighbors like Dustin Thomas and Mahlon Stoltzfus have cleared my driveway of snow already. Many of you have taken meals to help those who've had surgery or a baby. Men have been helping Gratz with his therapy while others buy Joan's groceries. Some of you have helped people clean their homes or move, or done some car repair, yard work, babysitting, and so on. In a normal church, people help each other like this. Sometimes we're not too good at *asking* for help, but many give. *Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.* Phil.2:4

3. **Spending:** In a normal church, people give each other money...

When I first preached this message last summer, God prompted me to begin putting a sum of money back from each paycheck that was solely to give away. I have been having the time of my life doing that. Beyond planned giving to Christian work—the church, missionaries—it's been a delight to hear about a need and be able to do—at least a little—about it.

*...they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.* 2 Cor.8:3-4

*You sent me aid again and again when I was in need.* Phil.4:16

4. **Honesty:** In a normal church, people tell each other the truth...

Betty always tells me I don't need to be so honest. She tells me that—for example—when a woman asks if you like her dress, she really *doesn't* want to know, unless you actually *do* like her dress. So when I say that honesty is the mark of a normal church, I don't mean that each believer says everything that comes to his mind that's true! But isn't it true that dishonesty's much easier and common in Christ's church than a loving frankness? I'll tell others what I think of you but not you. You'll tell others what I should do, but not me. I'll sin against you but never admit it.

- a. Confession: *...confess your sins to each other...* Jas.5:16 (1 Cor.4:5: *He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.*)
- b. Confrontation: *When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he was clearly in the wrong.* Gal.2:11
- c. Exhortation. *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.* Heb.10:24 *...speaking the truth in love...* Eph.4:15

5. **Forgiveness:** In a normal church, people forgive each other for anything. In

an abnormal church, people cherish others' offenses. Like worry beads, they turn them over and over, remembering real and imaginary offenses, spoonfeeding their bitterness. Like a slaveowner, they put the offender in chains of obligation. Yet the shadow of the cross looms high above our supposed injustice whispering, "Was it *this* bad?" *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.* Eph.4:32

*"If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."* Lk.17:3-4

In a normal church, people are eager to shed themselves of unforgiveness so that they can get blessed too. Mark 11:25: *And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."*

6. **Witness:** In a normal church, people are bothered that there are still lost people. Jesus said *...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* Acts 1:8.

I have not said anything about love. And the Bible is full of admonition to love one another. Love your brothers and sisters. But everything I've just described is a manifestation of love. I'd rather reinforce what love looks like than keep pounding away at the intangible: "love one another." When we are marked by these 6 things, we *are* loving. We are united.

By what process do we become a united church like this?

1. Obedience: "Yes God, I will" every time God dispatches us for a visit or prompts us to extend an invitation, every time God prods us to volunteer to assist someone, when God urges us to peel off a few twenties and spend some money on someone, to spend
2. Prayer: But I believe even obedience demands something *beyond* it, lest obedience become so dreary, so demanding, so unpleasant that we do just enough to muffle our conscience. Unity comes from spiritual power; which is the direct result of prayer. That's the bedrock of church unity and since unity not only affects us as individual Christians but the entire church, the key is not just individual prayer, but *church* prayer: praying together for the together church. *Together*, calling on the name of the Lord. We now have corporate prayer times 6 times a week (inc. Sundays) because we desperately want and need God's power. For this local fellowship to be the church God wants it to be: unified and loving as seen by how we treat each other and the world, then we need corporate prayer. For that is *the means* God's given us to get His help. With this tool we summon God to do what we *cannot* do ourselves. By praying we admit we're weak, that ultimately only God can do certain things.

After all, Col.2:19 says that it is *God* who makes the church grow. In warning Christians about a type of person who has gotten off track, Paul says *He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.*

**Concl:**

A number of years ago I asked a pastor who left local church ministry after pastoring 44 years, if he missed it. “About like I miss a toothache.” Seminaries paint a vivid picture of pastoral ministry including its down side to warn off those who will get disillusioned and quit anyway. So when I became a pastor I wondered if I’d last.

But with each passing year, God instills greater and greater love in my heart for the church. While in my early days as a pastor, I used to dream about having a ministry outside the local-church. Now I can hardly conceive of such a thing. The church is what Jesus died for. The church is his precious bride. The church is of infinite worth. It is worth, praying for.

Do you love the church, at least that much? Come pray with us this week. There are laminated bookmarks in your mailbox that give the times, and if you don’t have a mailbox or want extras, there are some on the information table in the lobby.

Our theme for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary was in the printed inserts in the Free Press and on the banner. But I said little about it. “We give up! Let’s pray!” We give up was not a confession that we are a mess. But in terms of a normal church where people are so committed to one another in love that they are visiting each other, assisting each other, spending on each other, being honest with each other, forgiving one another, and witnessing to the world, God has much he wants to do in us yet. And in addition to obedience, it is prayer that will do a work in the forest, prayer that will transform Keystone Church.

When I’m sick my temperature goes up but when health returns, my temperature returns to normal too. After travel across multiple time zones, I don’t sleep well. But once my body irons itself out my sleep patterns return to normal. Normal is healthy. Normal is not perfect, not necessarily ideal, but it’s healthy. So, a normal church is one that is common and good—in God’s eyes. But how do we get a normal church? If the solution is to do what other churches do, we learn from them. If it’s to

Rom.15:14: <sup>14</sup>I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another. <sup>15</sup>I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me <sup>16</sup>to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

1 Cor.1:10-12: <sup>10</sup>I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. <sup>11</sup>My brothers, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. <sup>12</sup>What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas”<sup>o</sup>; still another, “I follow Christ.”

1 Cor.12:12: <sup>12</sup>The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.

2 Cor.13:11: <sup>11</sup>Finally, brothers, good-by. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace.

Gal.3:28: <sup>28</sup>There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Eph.4:32: <sup>32</sup>Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Phil.2:2: <sup>2</sup>then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.

Yet, these are the kinds of things that Paul prayed about most often. What do you pray about most often? What do we pray about most often as a church? Disease, aches and pains. Temporal things. Temporary things. What *should* we be praying about? Eternal things.

Rom.15:5-7: <sup>5</sup>May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>7</sup>Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

One of the most important things Jesus ever said to the church was “Apart from me, you can do nothing.” (Jn.15:5) In the American Church, we are by and large full of bluster because we are trying to do *most* things, without him. *Our* SS ministry, *our* evangelism program, *our* VBS, *our* church planting, *our* Easter services, *our* mission efforts. Whether there is any real spiritual result or not, we pat ourselves on the back anyway because after all, we did something *for* God, even if it was *without* Him.

The American church is marked by apathy, powerlessness, fruitless meetings, budget battles, quarrels over minutiae, disunity and church splits. Pastors browbeat, bribe and threaten, but fail to call their people to pray despite...., “Apart from me, you can do nothing.” I believe that when prayer is missing in the life of the church, *Jesus* is missing in the life of the church.

Pastor Dee reminded me that *we*—meaning us pastors—must assume responsibility for what is wrong or what needs to change in the church. The small amount of corporate prayer is my fault. What little there *is*, has been consumed with individual & personal needs at the expense of the large, forest-sized needs of the church: love, unity, evangelism, spiritual power. We’re down on the ground looking at the trees, instead of up in the air, surveying the forest. *Consequently*, the forest isn’t as healthy and productive as it might be, and because the forest isn’t, neither are the *trees*. This sermon is entitled, “The Normal Church.” I thought about calling it “The Ideal Church” but I don’t think most imperfect sinners are interested in messing up a perfect church, and that’s what “ideal” implies. Perhaps “typical” church, but that adjective implies *what you usually find* in a church. And, what you usually find is not what I’m interested in for Keystone: petty quarrels, gossip, stinginess, long-held bitterness, people unavailable for ministry, and for each other, and people more concerned about budget line items than people’s salvation!