

Chapter One

Together in Unity

*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is
For brothers to dwell together in unity!*

I can still remember my first day at school. It was my fifth birthday and quite a special birthday present. At last I could go to school with my sisters. I am not so sure that they were as happy about it as me! I sat with my mother in the large hall waiting to see the headmistress and to learn to class I was assigned. I was taken to my classroom and informed that Miss Walsh was to be my teacher. What a wonderful day I had. I am sure that I played right up until the moment my mother came to collect me. I was going to like school!

This was not many years after the end of the Second World War, and the economy of Great Britain had taken a battering as a result of the cost of the war. Unemployment was rising and production was low. There was a scarcity of many things and rationing of some vital food was still in place. Not that these problems had even entered my busy five year-old mind. At five years old most of my memories were of good times. Life was good.

However, not everything was pleasant. In their efforts to protect the health of the children, the government had introduced free milk into the schools. Every morning we would line up and be given our small bottle of milk. I should have enjoyed this. I would have enjoyed it had they not insisted on giving us a little red capsule of cod liver oil to be taken with the milk. I can still taste the awful combination of milk and fishy oil mixed together. We were reluctant to take the capsules, but were assured that it was good for us and, these being the days when children did as they were told, we forced it down.

Good for us it may have been – but it most certainly was not pleasant!

We lived on the fifth floor of a block of flats owned by the local council. There were plenty of children in the flats and we did not have the luxury of many toys. Not that that stopped us from finding many alternatives. We did not suffer from repetitive strain injuries and our eyes did not suffer strain from computer keyboards and play stations, or from watching too much television - we did not have such things. Our injuries were cuts, bumps and bruises from climbing trees and over fences into the 'bomb sites' that were a treasure house of things that could be converted into toys. The homemade box carts were a source of our greatest fun, and probably the cause of our greatest scars and bruises. I still have a scar on my right arm as a 'trophy' from those wonderful days!

The down side to our adventures was that the wear and tear was not just on our skins but also on our clothes. I can remember being scolded many times because I would come home with my clothes spoiled. On one particularly occasion I remember being disciplined after having had great fun 'grass-sliding'. This involved sitting on a square

taken from an old cardboard box and sliding down the highest grassy banks we could find. The problem was that it was difficult to stay on the cardboard and often we would slide most of the way down on the seat of our trousers. Not that we cared – at least not until we got home! The discipline was, we were told, good for us but the effect on my backside was certainly not as pleasant as the grassy slopes had been!

The purpose of these stories is to illustrate that, although some things are good, they are not necessarily pleasant. Ice cream is good until it hits a sensitive filling in our tooth, and then becomes most certainly unpleasant. Taxation is necessary and if it is spent wisely by the government is good, but to receive a demand for payment from the tax authorities is particularly unpleasant.

Equally, it is possible for something to be pleasant but not necessarily good. For example, the bible tells us that we can enjoy ‘the temporary pleasures of sin’. Much of the nature of sin is self-seeking. We sin for ourselves for our own satisfaction, but the pleasures are temporary. To the drunkard the numbing effects of alcohol can be very pleasant, however, the hangover the next morning is far from good. To the adulterer, to lie in the arms of another may bring a moment of pleasure, but it will bring ruin to his family. The momentary pleasure of winning for the gambler soon evaporates when he has lost all and is unable to feed his family. An addict will become hooked on drugs because of the high when the drug hits his brain, but he does not stay high for long and he soon craves another fix to remove the unpleasant effects of withdrawal. Because something is pleasant does not necessarily mean that it is good. Anyone who has eaten too much honey at one sitting knows that even though the taste is very good, too much is certainly not pleasant!

However, there are some things that are both good and pleasant. To my taste buds, honey is very pleasant and if I do not eat too much it is also very good for me. To lie down and drop my head on a clean, crisp pillow at the end of a long and tiring day is certainly both good and pleasant. The smile on the face of a child, the sunrise, the feel of a cool breeze on a hot day, all are both good and pleasant. To my mind, it is often the simple and least expensive things that tend to fall into the category of ‘good and pleasant’.

Since I have been teaching unity I have tried to look for such things. To walk through the rose garden in my local park when the flowers are in full bloom and rich in fragrance; God tells us that trees, especially fruit trees are both good and pleasant. He tells us in Genesis 2:9 that trees are pleasant to the sight and good for food. I am so thankful that He made most trees green. It is such a restful colour to the eyes. Praising our creator is also both good and pleasant. David wrote in Psalm 147 that ‘it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant and praise is beautiful.’

The one thing that the bible says is both good and pleasant is the one thing that is hardest to find. I have travelled in almost seventy nations and have taught and preached in churches of most major denominations in addition to hundreds of small indigenous congregations. What is this elusive thing? It is unity. I find togetherness almost everywhere, but that is most certainly not what I am meaning. I find harmony but that does not mean there is unity. I find agreement, but enemies agree to differ, which is probably what makes them enemies!

Togetherness? This is so very easy to achieve. I have worked with pastors and leaders and been together with them many times. There are times when they have had a dispute or disagreement and have asked me to sit with them as they try to solve their differences. They come to me together. We sit together. We reason together. We sometimes drink tea or eat together. Many times the problem can be solved. On occasions they leave together without solving their difficulty. They leave together but not in unity.

I love to watch athletics. Each competitor or team have their supporters. As the runners are stretching for the winning line the supporters are shouting for and encouraging their different athletes. They are shouting together - but they are not in unity.

Many times a husband and wife will be quarrelling all the way to the church. As they turn the corner and see the pastor waiting to greet them they turn on a smile and say, "We are fine, thank you!" and sit together and praise the Lord together in the service. As they leave the church together and go back around the corner their smiles disappear and the quarrel continues. Unity? Togetherness does not bring unity!

During a trip in the Ukraine some years ago I went past a beautiful Orthodox church in the town of Cherkassy. There was a service in progress and the pastor with me asked me if I had ever been to an Orthodox service. As I had not, we went inside and stood at the back. From above us came the most wonderful harmonies as the choir sang. I did not understand the words, but the music was both good and pleasant. The harmonies were exquisite. I may be doing the choir an injustice, but being in harmony does not guarantee unity. We may be singing from the same song sheet, but have hatred in our heart for the man who is having an affair with our brother's wife. Harmony will not bring unity!

"Ah well!" the businessman might say, "A contract is made to be broken!" In business, contracts are being made every day and lawyers are getting ever richer as more and more people break their contracts. When a contract has run its course and the time has come for payment people will look for all sorts of ways to try and avoid payment in full. The day has passed when a handshake meant something. It was a question of honour. 'My word is my bond'! Today, people enter into a covenant of marriage only after reaching an agreement about how to divide property when they divorce. A covenant, which should not be broken, has brokenness written into it. Thankfully a covenant-keeping God made the covenant that we have through the cross of Jesus. There is no 'opt out' clause! He is not looking for a way to break the covenant, but is daily looking for men and women to include in His covenant. The signing of a contract or agreement, even the making of a covenant will certainly not guarantee unity. If men truly lived in unity, there would be no need for contracts.

God does not say it is good and pleasant for us to be together and have harmony. He does not say that the signing of a contract is pleasant. But it is good and it is pleasant when brothers dwell *together in unity*. (Italics mine).

Before I go any further, let me point out that with God there is no political correctness. The use of the word 'brothers' is a generic term that embraces all mankind - both male and female. When we put up a warning about a guard dog we do

not distinguish whether the dog is male or female. The word dog is generic. I have never seen a warning sign that said “Beware! Guard bitch!”

Genesis 1:27 says that ‘God created man (generic) in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.’ He made us to be male and female – masculine and feminine and not emasculated and feminist. With God there is no political correctness. In Him there is only truth.

In Psalm 133, God is not talking about the unsaved. He says it is good and pleasant when **brothers** are together in unity. Therefore, we cannot assume that unity is always good or always pleasant. There have been many godless alliances in world history that have caused disaster and destruction throughout the world. May God forbid that the radical fundamentalist religious groups that use terror and violence to achieve their confused end should ever unify against what they perceive to be the infidel, or against the West, or even America alone. There is power in unity.

Almost from the beginning of time God has opposed those who form such alliances for evil. In Genesis 11 we read the story of how people were unified for their own sakes.

Now the whole earth had one language and one speech. And it came to pass as they journeyed from the east, that they found a place in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there. Then they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. And they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.” But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. And the Lord said, “Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.” So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city.

Notice that the people had *one language* and *one speech*. The problem was not an understanding of the language. There are many nations that have a common language but it is difficult to find a nation that has unity. Kenya has 53 tribal groups each with their own language. The government has adopted Swahili as a common language across the whole nation, but this did not prevent the bloody tribal clashes in 1992. The people of Shinar had one language and used it to unify themselves against God. They had a common language but they also had ‘one speech’. The fact that they could understand one another meant that they were able to communicate with each other and devise a plan that they could all agree upon.

On my first trip to the former Soviet Union I led a team of people to Kiev, now the capital of the Ukraine. It was at the time when the words *glasnost* and *perestroika* were beginning to emerge. We took literature with us and were privileged to be able to distribute literally thousands of bibles and tens of thousands of pieces of literature.

Nowhere was closed to us. We were working with a church that had previously been persecuted for failing to compromise and register with the communist government. The pastor, along with many dear saints, knew what it was to be in prison for his faith. My dear hosts, Pastor Kosachuk and his wife, had suffered persecution and jail for printing Christian literature in their home.

I was invited to visit and preach in one of the prisons. Only one of us could go in with an interpreter, and as team leader I was nominated. We were taken into a room with dozens of prisoners, none of whom could speak anything but Russian. They called my interpreter away and I was left alone with these men. I knew nothing of their history and could not communicate with them. Language was a barrier. After more than thirty minutes I was beginning to wonder if the Soviet authorities were unhappy with me because of the distribution of bibles! Thankfully the interpreter came back and I was able to preach the Gospel which these men received with joy. However, when I was unable to communicate with them, the authorities knew that I could not plot anything with them. We had a different language. If I had come to hatch some escape plan the authorities were safe. I could do nothing to become unified with them until we could speak together.

The people of Shinar, or Babel, as the place became known, had the same language and therefore understood one another. As a result they decided upon a plan that would unify them. They would build a city and a tower so as to make a name for themselves. The Lord came down to see what they were doing. His concern was not that they were able to build a strong city, nor that they had a way to build a tower to reach the heavens. Neither of these things were a problem to the Lord.

The one thing that concerned the Lord was that the people were in unity and not for good. *“The people are one!”* It was the unity of these people that concerned the Lord. Why? *“Nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them.”* In other words nothing shall be impossible to them. It was not their language but their *one speech* that enabled the unity. They wanted to build a name ‘for themselves’. In America there are many so-called Christian TV stations. The programme listings frequently carry the name of a man or woman. I hesitate to point the finger at any one ministry but too often the ministry carries the name of a man. “Building a name for ourselves’ will not bring unity. I have found so often this to be a great cause for disunity. If the church was to truly put Jesus at the centre of all that they plan and do, unity would grow.

There is power in unity. When men dwell together in unity nothing shall be impossible to them. The men of Babel were not the people of God. Their purpose was not to bring glory to God but to themselves. If God says, ‘In unity, nothing shall be withheld from them’ when talking about those who are against Him, how much more is it true for the Church?

This is the church that Jesus prayed for in John 17:22

“That they may be one (Father) just as We are one”

What is the church missing today? Where is this power? Where is the church for which Jesus prayed? It is here! But it lacks the power. It lacks the impossible! It is so

full of division and worldliness and political intrigue and jealousy and criticism and ... The church today lacks the very thing that would enable it to overcome all the powers that stand in the world today; against the principalities and powers, the rulers of the darkness of this age and the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:12) This is not written to be in condemnation of the church. I love His church. It is written to be an encouragement for brother to seek brother; for pastor to come together with pastor; for an end to the manifold and manifest division in the church.

This is the will of God.

So many times I hear Christians telling me that they belong to a New Testament church. I understand what they mean but I cannot help feeling that a true New Testament church is difficult to find. I have heard of churches in China which, if what I hear is true, come close, but I am not sure that I have yet found a church that fully reflects the church as seen in the Acts of the Apostles.

I believe it is a fair statement to say that the church was at its purest at the moment the Holy Spirit fell in power upon unified believers. This would take us to the Day of Pentecost. Here we find that the church is living in the conditions of Psalm 133.

When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. (Acts 2:1)

They were together (in one place) in unity (with one accord). Strong's Dictionary of Hebrew Words translates 'in one accord' as unanimously. This was more than just agreement. This was one mind and purpose – they were in unity. Was this the major key that enabled the events of Pentecost? Was it their unity that brought about a reversal of the scattering of the people at Babel? What is the most significant happening as the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the people in that upper room? They began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. This was more than the glossalalia of the prayer language that He gives. This was not the gift of tongues with interpretation. This was a speaking in languages that were unknown to the speaker and yet understood by the listener. They were speaking the languages of Medes, Elamites, Cappadocians, Asians, Phrygians, Egyptians and Libyans! These were not scholars, but fishermen and tax collectors.

Because of the unity of the unsaved at Babel and because they did not have in mind the things of God, the Lord gave them different languages to confuse them so that they could not communicate.

Now at Pentecost, because of the unity of the believers who had in mind the things of God, the Lord gave them the gift of languages (tongues) so that they could communicate and unite the people. If the church had stayed in unity, nothing would be withheld from them! Even today!

When Peter stood up and addressed the crowd as "Men of Israel" who was in the crowd? Had the Medes and Parthians, the Asians, Libyans and Egyptians all suddenly gone home? Of course not! When Peter spoke to the crowd, did they all break up into small groups for special interpretation? By no means! When Peter spoke to the crowd

they could all understand him in their own language? Because of the unity of the believers everyone heard and understood enough to ask the question, “What shall we do?” The blessings of unity saw about three thousand people saved and added to the church that day.

That is New Testament church!