

Better Together: Building Oneness
Sermon 7-1-18
Pastor Curtis Dehmey

Ephesians 2:11-22

¹¹So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision” —a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— ¹²remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Galatians 5:13-15

¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Message:

(Listen in the audio version for Abundant Life Elder, Jordan Craft, as he shares the story of Abundant Life) Thanks so much for sharing with us how God has lead you to this point of joining us here at Providence! This is truly God bringing forth His Kingdom! Oneness is something that Paul speaks to in our

passages today in Ephesians 2:11-22 and Galatians 5:13-15. Oneness is something that I think all of us have embraced thus far. In verse 11 Paul makes it known that a derogatory term used for Gentiles was “the uncircumcision.” This was offensive to Gentiles because it depicted them as less than. This was a big deal between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians in the early church. Jewish Christians felt that if Gentile Christians were going to obey the law and therefore, God, that they must be circumcised. Otherwise, these Gentiles weren’t fully Christian or part-of the group. And Gentiles felt that the Jewish Christians worshipped the law more than they worshipped Christ. That they didn’t recognize that righteousness cannot be found in the law, but in the one who fulfills the law, Christ. Paul speaks to both parties starting in verse 12, “...¹²remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” Remember. Remember that we were once all foreigners to God. Not knowing the salvation and freedom that we have in Christ. That it’s not just the Jewish Christians who have experienced the salvation of Jesus, but Gentile Christians have also experienced the salvation of Jesus. Paul is establishing that both parties have at least one main thing in common, they know the salvation of Jesus.

Pay attention, verse 14 is the core of today’s message, “¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” One of the positives of the big C Church declining, is that it’s forcing churches to put aside the barriers and dividing walls and trying to imagine a future where churches can partner together. We might still have our differences, but where can we partner together in the Kingdom work? In the midst of conflict, Christ is our peace. Christ is our identity. “...he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” Even though Providence Church and Abundant Life may be different and at different stages in the life cycle of the church, God has made us one because of the one whom we worship. Paul goes on, “¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.” When Paul envisions the end of time or the fullness of the Kingdom of God reigning, his vision is that the people of God, Jewish Christians, Gentile Christians, Providence Church, Abundant Life, that we would all worship as one people following after Christ. Paul says as much in Romans 15:5, “⁵May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶so that together you may with one voice glorify the

God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The pinnacle of a harmonious people of Christ is when they can worship God together, according to Paul.

To further illustrate the people of God coming together, Paul uses building imagery. “¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” What’s a cornerstone? Well...it’s not a capstone, the stone that you would put at the top of a structure. It’s not a keystone, the stone that you would use to complete a stone arch. A cornerstone is the first stone laid in which the entire structure will depend upon. If the cornerstone is not set correctly or it’s crooked or it’s the wrong stone, the whole structure will be off-balance, off-kilter. So here’s the thing, we can build unity with one another. We can all get along. We can cohabitate, for lack of a better term, as two churches under one roof. We could build unity based upon our willpower and we can choose to love and tolerate one another. But that’s not oneness. Nor is it building our foundation or relationship upon Christ.

To be honest with you, for a while, I didn’t really understand the difference between oneness and unity. Tim Doering and Jay McCumber would speak about the difference between oneness and unity, but I didn’t really get it for a while. It helped this past week as I read Keith Yoder’s book, “Presence-based Leadership.” Keith is the interim pastor at Abundant Life if you were unaware. So I’m borrowing some of his ideas and interpretation here. When we talk about unity, we’re talking about “getting along.” Meaning, we all have our differences. Our different perspectives. Our different personalities. Maybe even our different interpretations of scripture. Unity is tolerating one another despite these differences. In unity we may argue, bicker and fight, but in the end we’re “family” so to speak. We’ll make it work together. In fact, within the Church of the Brethren, this is the message often preached. We bicker and fight over governance issues and theology, but the common sentiment, especially from a liberal side, is “why can’t we just all get along?” So we have the fiercest determination that we are going to maintain this shell of unity. Meanwhile, we are beating each other up on the inside. We’re maintaining the perception of unity, but we’re tearing each other apart internally. In some ways, unity can be a façade. Or unity can only be maintained for so long. Especially if unity is absent of Christ. In oneness, though, our identity is first and foremost in Christ. So it’s not in Abundant Life. It’s not in Providence Church. It’s not in what position you hold. It’s not in your job. In

oneness our identity is first and foremost in Christ. That's why Paul speaks of Christ being the cornerstone. He is our foundation. In oneness we all worship Christ. Christ is our identifier. And because we all are one with Christ, we can be one with each other. Now, oneness doesn't mean sameness. Oneness doesn't mean sameness. In oneness, we can still all maintain our unique personalities and giftings. We can still maintain our two distinct churches. In fact, it can be quite beautiful to have many different churches with many different personalities and giftings because it represents the tapestry of God's creation. Not one of us is the same as the other. But the focus is not about simply "getting along," but it's on Christ and what Christ has for us. I think this is an affirmation of where both our churches are at right now. Because we both are looking to Christ for the answers and our identity is first and foremost in Christ, it's why we could even consider this option of two distinct churches under one roof. So I commend you for your willingness and openness to listen to Jesus. Because we all are abiding in his presence, we can do some great things in the name of Christ. I'm starting to wonder though, what else could we do together that we could not do apart because of our oneness in Christ? What is God calling us to partner with him on next? Where is he calling us to continue to partner together?

The other month I was meeting with the Netzer Pastors group in Pottstown. Tim Doering has done a great job at bringing together different ministry leaders of many different paths. Some denominational. Others, independent churches. And we all celebrate that we can come together, worship the Lord together and bask in Christ's presence together. We listen for His voice and calling. And in these meetings we feel this sense of oneness with each other because we are one with Christ. But Jay McCumber was at our meeting this time and he was encouraging us to consider what's next for the Pottstown group. He had us practice resting in the presence of God and listening for what He is saying. And one of the things I shared that I heard from the Lord was that the group needed to move beyond celebrating that we are one in Christ. That all these different churches and paths of life came together. That's something worth celebrating, but let's not plateau there. Let's not rest there. And Jay gave a slight correction to me. Which was good. He said, "Instead of moving 'beyond' oneness, let's move forward IN oneness." And that's part of the word that God has given me this morning to deliver to you. It's really great that we have arrived at this spot where both of our churches can meet under one roof. It's a testimony and glimpse of the Kingdom of God. But folks, this is only the beginning of what God is going to do because of this venture. It's only the beginning. So I caution you not to rest there as if we have arrived. It's worth celebrating, but God has even more great things in store for us as we face Christ and we rest in his presence. I don't know what that is, but I know that when we are one with Christ, we are one with each other. We can do some things

together and we can do some things apart and that's okay. But all in all, we get to worship and glorify the one who is our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

This is why in Galatians 5:13-15 it says, “¹³For you were called to freedom, [You hear that? When we are one with Christ, we experience freedom. Salvation.] brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ¹⁵If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.” I want to encourage us that as we experience the mutual benefit and blessing of this venture as two distinct churches to become slaves to one another. There may come a time where we don't get along so well. We're currently in a honeymoon stage. I pray that in the midst of conflict we will remember the freedom that Christ gives to each of us. And as we are faithfully one with Him, we will be one with each other in the body of Christ. And that even in the midst of disagreement and conflict that we would come together in Christ's presence and become one with Him and listen for His voice. That we will be slaves to one other. That we will love each other because Christ first loved us. That the peace of Christ will reign.

Let me just name for a second that what we're doing is scary. Where is this all going? I have no idea. What is God going to do? I really can't say with any certainty. I love to plan 15 steps out and God is only calling me/us to be faithful to step 1 or 2. It scares the crap out of me. But I do know this, our God is good. Our God is faithful. Our God will not let us down. Our God will reveal His plans for us as we need to know. At the same time, I'm excited to see how God is going to lead us to continue to partner together in ministry and continue to build His Kingdom. Like I said before, this is just the beginning. God has some awesome stuff in store for all of us. And I want to know all the stuff. I want to know what God has in store for us. But the best thing we can do right now is to rest in His presence. To listen for what the Lord is telling us. To ask God how we can partner with Him in what He is doing. I don't completely understand all of this, but I know our God is good. We trust in Him. I know that as we practice oneness with Christ, peace will reign between our two churches. “¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” Even though we are two separate churches under one roof, we are one with Christ. May we continue to glorify God and partner in His Kingdom work. Amen.