

The Implications of One

Deuteronomy 6: 4f

Question: How can we overcome a culture that values division? – Division vs. Unity

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one...." What are the implications of thinking of God as One? What did this mean to the people of Israel? It meant monotheism, not polytheism. It meant to them originally that their God Yahweh was pre-eminent among the gods of all the nations. Eventually, it meant that Yahweh was the only God – the God of all the nations.

How is God one? I see three possibilities. First, God's oneness is limiting. God is a unified being, but separate from what is not God. The things of God, the sacred, are separate from those things that are not of God – secular. This can be divisive if *God is the one I see, but not the one you see.*

A second possibility for God's oneness is as an all-encompassing everything. That is, everything is really God in different forms? In a sense, this is what is called pantheism. Everything is God.

There is, perhaps, a third option that God is the source and the meaning of all that is. This is a perspective of mystery -- not so much a literal or physical description of God, but a belief and trust in the unifying force that underlies the universe. Centuries later, the Apostle Paul addressed Athenians on Mars' Hill:

Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands." (Acts 17: 22-24)

Einstein wrote that the fundamental question of existence was this: "is the universe a friendly place?" The invitation of our faith is to proclaim, "yes." The universe is not just a friendly place, but the mystery underlying it is personal, for us, and committed to us. To say that God is *one* is to profess the faith that all life is *one*. It is faith in the oneness, the unity, of the universe.

God is one, but what about the unity of humanity? How can we be both one with each other and also unique at the same time? It is a question of priorities: either self-interest or communal interest. Have you been following the Presidential campaign? It is close to the national party conventions and the Democratic party is pretty divided between the supporters of Barack Obama and those of Hillary Clinton. Despite the divisions, they keep saying, "we'll be united!" How will they find unity within their division? They'll find unity only by seeing their self-interest in working together in a kind of convenient cooperation. Is this unity?

How about the Olympics? Have you been watching them? It's always very exciting as athletes representing lots of different countries, races, and ideologies come together to compete with each other. It has been interesting for me to watch the games from the perspective of this question of unity vs. division. There have been events in which the same athletes compete as teams (such as relay races or doubles in tennis) and, at other times, as individuals. I am struck that some athletes seem to accomplish so much more as part of a team than they do competing as individuals. This is not to denigrate individual performance, but rather to highlight that the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts – the power of unity.

Does unity mean that I must give up my own interests? Yes, sometimes. It is not healthy to ignore our own interest. We need to value ourselves, but there are times it is necessary to put the good of community or nation ahead of self-interest. Sometimes America needs to subordinate our national self-interest to the good of all people, the good of humanity as a whole. Last night at the Presidential candidates' forum on faith, John McCain responded to a question about America's greatest moral failure by saying it was a "failure to give ourselves to a cause greater than our nation's self interest." We will discover that the good of humanity is ultimately in our self-interest nationally and personally.

There is not just one way of being united. Diversity is not the opposite of unity. There are differences between people, nations, cultures, and religions. Those differences constitute our diversity. It is vital for our health and strength as human beings to be clearly defined individually. Unity cannot mean the loss of personal identity by being absorbed by an amorphous uniformity. Being different cannot mean being cut off from one another – judging and condemning.

Religion causes great division. This has been true throughout recorded human history. Sadly for us, none has been more divisive than Christianity. But we are entering a new era of Christianity – a postmodern era. There is a possibility that the Christian church can be a force for unity, but only if we can model respect for others who disagree, who hold different doctrinal, theological, or philosophical positions. Crossroads Church can lead the way by following Jesus in such a way that it is clear that the reign of God includes all people.

Last Friday night, I had the privilege of helping to celebrate the wedding of Dwight Carlson of Crossroads Church and Anne Anderson of St. James Catholic Church. This wedding ceremony was set in the context of the Catholic festival of the Assumption of Mary – a theological emphasis that is difficult for non-Catholics to grasp. The service included communion, which might have presented a problem since the Catholic Church does not practice open communion. Back in the vestry room, the Catholic pastor asked me if I wanted to receive communion -- that it would be okay despite the official church position. Then, he told me this story. At the funeral of Pope John Paul II, Brother Roger -- the founder of the Taize community in France and not a Catholic -- came forward to Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict) who was notable for his strong enforcement of strict Catholic dogma. This faithful non-catholic asked to receive communion and Cardinal Ratzinger gave Brother Roger communion.

The fact that communion was open to we non-Catholics at St. James last Friday night gave evidence of what church can be for our nation and our world. The words of the hymn that was sung while the bride processed illustrate how the church can be instrumental in overcoming division in the house of humanity. We can value diversity and embrace the fundamental unity of all of life as a matter of faith.

Let us build a house where all are named.

Their songs and visions heard and loved and treasured,

taught and claimed as words within the Word;

built of tear and cries and laughter'

prayers of faith and songs of grace.

Let this house proclaim from floor to rafter

“All are welcome! All are welcome!

All are welcome in this place!”

(Marty Haugen)