

## **In One Accord**

### *The Unity to Which God has Called Us and For Which He Equips Us*

Joy Roberts and Julie Wildman noticed something amiss with children after the 2012 introduction of smart phones. “We have literally watched our kids lose their ability to navigate face-to-face friendships. Without strong social connections, loneliness has become an epidemic followed by rising levels of anxiety, depression, self-harm and harm of others. We got curious on how we could equip a generation of kids to be really good friends.”<sup>1</sup>

Studying the research on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), they began to feel a sense of hope that their children’s ability to live in relationship and community could be recovered. They started Friendzy, a K-8 SEL-based friendship program. SEL programs like Friendzy produce positive, long-range outcomes in multiple realms, including academic.<sup>2</sup> They make community-building fun with exercises like “The Kindness Clock Craft” and “Be Kind all the Time Bingo Game.”<sup>3</sup>

The church is, at its best, the best SEL program in the world. “Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity” (Psalm 133:1). The social skills we learn at the feet of Jesus and through His Holy Spirit have the potential of creating a powerful, resilient community that draws the attention of the world: “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

The unity God promises does something many think impossible. It brings people together in fellowship in spite of the differences that typically divide—race, class, and temperament. And it does this through working changes in identity, purpose, and practice.

### **Identity**

Believers’ identity is, first and foremost, grounded in Jesus Christ. All other identity markers fade in comparison to the bright beacon of our oneness in Jesus.

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise. Galatians 3:26-29

The three categories mentioned here summaries three potential competing identities—ethnicity, class, and sex.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.friendzy.co/our-story>

<sup>2</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0031721718815668>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.friendzy.co/friendly-freebies>

**Ethnicity**, or “Jew nor Greek,” may refer to religious status, but also ethnic status, which is connected to nationality. Jews and Greeks had religious, ethnic, and national differences, differences which potentially separated them as do ours today. Jews as the chosen people of God tended to see the world as split into Jews and non-Jews; Greeks, who also took pride in their culture, saw the world as Greeks and non-Greeks. In other words, both had allowed their ethnic identity to become their primary identity, and in so doing had lost the ground for unity in the faith of Jesus. The introduction of the Christian faith gave them a crash course in their commonalities, as they both suffered persecution!

**Class**, or socioeconomic status, refers to where we plot on the social hierarchy. It poses a difficulty to have wealthy and poor mingling together as brothers and sisters. The envy and resentment that often arise between classes can erect barriers between believers. But it is not an insurmountable barrier in Christ, especially when the rich follow the biblical counsel to care for the poor (See Proverbs 19:17, Matthew 5:42, Acts 20:35, 1 John 3:17).

**Sex** is a biological phenomenon expressed as gender in a social context. People with xy chromosomes generally present as males, and people with xx chromosomes present as females.<sup>4</sup> “The war of the sexes” has been a real thing as men and women with their differing temperaments and positions have tried to occupy the same world. Depending on the social context, sex differences can automatically mean status differences. This makes oneness in Christ challenging.

The simple solution to divisions caused by ethnicity, class, or sex is right in the passage—“you are all one in Christ Jesus.” The faith of Jesus, as nothing else on earth, has the potential to dissolve long-standing divisions between people by lifting them out of the earthly, temporal context and placing them together on entirely new, heavenly ground. “Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. . . . Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Corinthians 5:16-17).

The dissolution of the walls between ethnicity, class, and sex is a miracle.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation. Ephesians 2:13-14.

### **Purpose**

In Jesus’ high priestly prayer, he pled with the Father for all believers “that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent me” (John 17:21). Our oneness reflects the oneness found in the Godhead itself.

This oneness does not discount individual calling. The Bible uses the analogy of the body to communicate this. The body’s parts differ in function and purpose, but work as one for the larger unit. “For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same

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<sup>4</sup> Because of current social phenomena, sexual identities have fanned out into the LGBTQ alphabet, but this is a relatively new development, as for most of civilization there have been but two sexes forming two genders

function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another” (Romans 12:4-5).

The Bible’s most comprehensive list of spiritual gifts is found in 1 Corinthians 12:

Wisdom  
Knowledge  
Faith  
Healing  
Miracles  
Prophecy  
Discernment  
Tongues  
Interpretation

These gifts, Paul says, are not to be arranged hierarchally as if one places a person at a higher status than another. Rather, God wants us to think in terms of cooperation. “There are many members, yet one body,” he says, then fleshes out an almost-silly picture of body parts telling one another they are not needed. How strange would it be, he says, for the body to be nothing but ears or noses! He then cautions that “those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor” (vs. 23). This passage makes it clear that God calls us to cut across our natural human tendency toward stratification and superiority to adopt a service-oriented approach to church governance.

So often we turn mere differences of calling into absolute standards. One person who would not be caught dead preaching in public looks down on the man who thrives on street preaching and distribution of Bibles. Some shame a woman with a gift for hospitality because of the fuss she puts into setting a gorgeous table, but this is how she strives to bring glory to God. We would let so many potentially-problematic things go if we simply recognized that God works through each of us differently, and that He cherishes those differences.

### **Practice**

In order to live and work in the harmony God desires for us, we must follow biblical practices of humility and grace.

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. Colossians 3:10-15

This passage paints a very simple yet profound picture of how the Christian life looks. Complaints will arise, and differences will surface! But with kindness, patience, and humility we may surmount them.

This passage tells us to “put on love.” The amplified Bible says it this way:

Beyond all these things put on and wrap yourselves in [unselfish] love, which is the perfect bond of unity [for everything is bound together in agreement when each one seeks the best for others].

We should wrap ourselves in love! This love cannot be generated; it must be received from outside, like a garment. But we do not “put on” in the sense of being phony or putting on a show. No! Any woman can tell you that a garment on the outside can change our experience inside. Once received, love can be internalized and then put to practice. So much of our ability to love and be loved involves the acquisition of skills. Let’s look at three: communication, conflict management, and connection.

**Communication** is the art of conveying our thoughts and feelings in words. In other words, in good communication we put our insides “out there.” Now, that is not a safe proposition if people will not be tender with our insides! So communication requires trust, which is facilitated by good listening. “Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath” (James 1:19). One of the most important love-skills we can acquire is listening (taking in what the other person thinks and feels) before speaking (putting out what we think and feel). Note that this never happens naturally! We intrinsically desire to put ourselves first. Therefore, good listening can’t be separated from humility and unselfishness, and must be cultivated like any other skill.

**Conflict management** closely follows good communication, for listening diffuses tension and creates an environment of understanding. Most people do not want to be agreed with, they simply want to be understood. Hearing each other carefully creates that sense of understanding and makes proper handling of inevitable conflict possible.

Matthew 18:15-17 lays out three simple steps for “offenses” arising between brothers and sisters. Jesus tells us to first engage in a private conversation with our brother. If that fails to resolve the issue, we should take one or two more with us. Only when those first two steps fail should we take the matter before the entire church for discipline. While escalating matters to this level may at times be necessary, most issues will resolve in the first step if we take it in love and humility. Paul says this beautifully in Galatians 6:1: “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.”

**Connection** occurs when human beings open up to the outside what they think and feel on the inside. This “inner Velcro” makes it possible to truly connect. Research shows that “opportunity for emotional disclosure”—meaning expression of feelings—assists in trauma recovery. When we create safe places in the church for people to self-disclose, it becomes a healing community. We are to “rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15). This

emotional resonance and attunement make church a safe and warm place for those in need of healing. We underestimate the power of this kind of evangelism.

### The Takeaway

Church is a school in which we learn new skills. Through new identity, purpose, and practice, we come together as one. Through life in biblical community, God teaches us new skills of communication, conflict resolution, and connection. Through this growth process we can come closer and closer as the day of Jesus' coming draws near.

### Quiz

1. Believers' identity is, first and foremost, grounded in \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Our primary identity as believers is in Jesus. Three potential competing identities are \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.
3. "Jew or Greek" may refer to religious identity, ethnic identity, or \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Love cannot be generated, it must be received from outside, like a \_\_\_\_\_.
5. So much of our ability to love and be loved involves the acquisition of \_\_\_\_\_.
6. If a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of \_\_\_\_\_.
7. Connection occurs when human beings open up to the \_\_\_\_\_ what they think and feel on the \_\_\_\_\_.
8. Good connections in church are a powerful, if neglected, form of \_\_\_\_\_.

## Answer Key

1. Jesus Christ
2. Ethnicity, class, sex
3. Nationality
4. Garment
5. Skills
6. Gentleness
7. Outside, inside
8. Evangelism

