

## Women's Spring Fellowship 2016

### Our Union in Christ

I recently read an article written on Business Insider about a man named Jesse Itzler and I quote:

*"Jesse Itzler felt he was in a rut. So he asked Navy SEAL David Goggins to live with him for 31 days, during which Jesse would do anything David told him to do.*

*Jesse would later write "Living With A Seal" documenting the grueling experience of getting whipped into shape by one of the toughest men on the planet. They ran through snowstorms, jumped into a frozen lake, and did lots and lots of push-ups.*

*They adopted the philosophy "if it's not (extremely difficult), we don't do it." David and Jesse explain in order to get better you need to constantly take yourself out of your comfort zone, or do something that's difficult every day."*

So, thanks for sharing what you've learned about one another! For many ladies in this room, meeting someone new was your "something extremely difficult" today! Doing this difficult thing has pushed you out of your comfort zone – and guess what? It's a first step toward getting out of your rut!

A rut filled with women you know, people just like you, women in your same season of life, women you've hung out with for years! And now the Lord, in His providence, is pushing you outside of your comfort zone and you're doing something new!

It's important for us to get to know each other on a more personal level, even if it means stepping outside of our comfort zones. And all of this has been ordained by our union in Christ. He has given us love for one another – the type of love that pushes us out of our comfort zones and into TRUE fellowship in the body of Christ.

True fellowship is sharing our lives with one another – even when the only thing we have in common is our faith in Christ Jesus. But, I believe, if we step out in faith, we'll soon discover that we have many things in common.

One of those things that we share is change! Life is full of constant change! And we've recently experienced significant change when the Lord took two different groups of worshipers and "joined" us together.

This experience reminded me of what the Lord ordained for my life years ago. In His perfect plan, the Lord would take me out of my comfortable environment and place me thousands of miles away from my family, my culture... my people!

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Many of you ladies know that I'm not a native Californian! I was born and raised in the South and met my husband through work. I was living in Atlanta and he was living here in San Diego when we met.

After our marriage, we settled into San Diego and began looking for a church home in our community. The morning of our first visit to the neighborhood church, my husband took me aside and looked at me very seriously and said:

Derrick: *"Honey, you need to know...they'll probably have a praise band there."*

Lillian: *"A what? A 'praise band'? What's that?"*

Derrick: *"Well, it's usually a guitarist or two and a drummer. Maybe someone at the keyboard."*

A keyboard! What in the world? What about the piano and the organ? I kept calm on the outside.

Lillian: *"Where do they put the praise band? Are they located behind the pulpit?"*

Derrick laughed nervously: *"Well, uh...there's not really a pulpit. It's usually just a stage with a podium."*

Lillian: *"A stage with a podium?"* My voice was becoming more excited and the volume was rising. *"Is that in front of the choir loft? What about the baptismal? Where is that?"*

By the time I was done, we were both laughing, seeing the humor in the situation. I was not in the South anymore. Things were different out here. And I began to meditate upon this, and thought of the revelation of Christ given to John the beloved disciple. In **Revelation 7:9-10** we read:

*<sup>9</sup>After this I (John) looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, <sup>10</sup>and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"*

And I thought about marriage. I had married a man that lived 2500 miles from my family, from my people. I was now living in a different part of the country with different customs, different foods - people dressed differently and behaved differently. Many things were very, very different! Even though I had travelled to many parts of the world, *living* somewhere else was a very different experience.

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The Lord ordained that I would marry this man from Southern California and dwell with *his* people. After all, when you marry the man, you marry the family!

The same is true for believers. When we come into union with Christ, we marry into *His* family! And it's not a family of our own choosing! God's family is very diversified. People "*from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages*" are called to know God through faith in Christ Jesus.

And their nations and tribes and languages bring different customs, food and dress. So many things are different – including our worship styles! This brings me back to that conversation with Derrick. We did visit that church and he was right – there was a praise band, no choir, no baptismal and the pastor didn't wear a suit and tie!

But there were many, many similarities! We read from the same Bible and the gospel was rightly proclaimed. The pastor made it clear that we are all dead in our trespasses and sins and in need of a Savior. And the only Person capable of providing that reconciliation to our Creator was His only begotten Son, without spot or blemish who came to make the sin payment for those who would believe in Him and, therefore, save believers from the wrath of a Holy God!

For all of our differences, we shared a common belief in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior! And that similarity was all that truly mattered! I thought of how the Lord had grown me up in His Word and surrounded me with His people. How my family and my church had poured God's Word and their very lives into my life, and how God had called me to a saving knowledge of Him through faith in Jesus Christ.

I had been nurtured in the Word and in the ways of the Lord for many years. Then I moved across country and married and settled here in San Diego. And I soon began to realize that God was up to something new! I was being called to step out in faith, and to root and ground myself among His people - people who were very different from me, yet shared a love of our Lord.

God gives this love of His people to all believers. We cannot possibly manufacture this type of love on our own! How could we?! How could we possibly manufacture empathy and mercy on our own? How could we overlook perceived offenses? How could we choose love over self without God's grace! There is no way!

I've learned these truths all over again these past months. I'm sure many of you ladies have, too! We have been joined together as two churches into one church. And what a beautiful picture this is of our union in Christ! Two becoming one! Do you see? Do you see what the Lord is up to?

He has given us a very practical example of His diversity through union. He has united all believers as one in Him.

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Jesus prayed about our union during His high priestly prayer before his crucifixion. We can read part of His prayer in **John 17**:

*<sup>17</sup> Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. <sup>18</sup> As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. <sup>19</sup> And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.*

*<sup>20</sup> "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup> that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.*

It was Jesus' prayer to His Father that believers be ONE. As we are united with Christ we are to be united to one another. Just as we are married to Christ, we are – in that sense – married to one another. And it's a very serious relationship!

Think about what Christ has done for us. How can we not extend this type of love to one another? It is unthinkable! It is unthinkable that we would not serve one another, and care for one another, forgive one another and be merciful to one another. Think about what Christ has done for us!

Christ's work for us and our union with Christ is described in **Ephesians Chapter 1**:

*<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <sup>4</sup> even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love <sup>5</sup> he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, <sup>6</sup> to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. <sup>7</sup> In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, <sup>8</sup> which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup> making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ"*

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Matthew Henry describes our union in Christ as “a great privilege, a spiritual blessing, and the foundation of many (other blessings).”

The Bible describes this union in several ways. Christ Jesus is the Vine. Believers are the branches (John 15:5). Christ is the Head of the body – believers are the body from the neck down (1 Cor. 6:15-19). Christ is the foundation and believers are living stones joined to the foundation (1 Peter 2:4-5).

The ultimate illustration of the believer's union with Christ is the marriage between one man and one woman. Dr. John Fesko describes our marriage union in this way:

“During the marriage ceremony, when a man and woman stand before the minister, they are two separate individuals. At the end of the ceremony, however, they are pronounced “husband and wife.” They are united; and the two become “one flesh” (Gen. 2:7; Eph. 5:25–31). The property of each individual becomes the property of both.

But in our marriage union to Christ, the glorious exchange is far greater. Our sin and guilt are imputed to Christ, and His perfect law-keeping and suffering are imputed to us—what is ours becomes His, and what is His becomes ours.

Because of the representative union that we share with Christ, the Father no longer looks upon us as sinful but sees only the righteousness and holiness of Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

Everything that God has given to believers “in Christ” *only exists in Christ* – not “in us”!

The union and fellowship that believers enjoy with one another is possible because it *already existed in the spiritual realm*. This unity already existed!

God has created our union and He has ordained it through His Son Jesus Christ! God elects people “in Christ” before the foundation of the world! We see this truth in **Romans 8**:

*<sup>28</sup> And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. <sup>30</sup> And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/union-with-christ-in-pauls-epistles/>

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Collectively believers are the "bride" of Christ. Marriage is a picture of Christ and His church! This is the mystery that the Apostle Paul referred to in his letter to the church at Ephesus:

**Ephesians 5:29-32**, *"<sup>29</sup> For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, <sup>30</sup> because we are members of his body. <sup>31</sup> "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."<sup>32</sup> This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church."*

Christ died for His bride. He died for me and I have died with Him. Should I not be willing to die to my personal preferences? To my desire for a choir? A pulpit? A baptismal?

In God's wisdom, He ultimately gave these things to me – *but only after they had lost their importance*. You see, the choir, the pulpit and the baptismal were only physical objects – objects that pointed to God, but objects that should not take precedence over my relationship with Him and His people.

My preferences eventually faded and then God blessed me with a physical church – a church that has pulpit, a baptismal and even a pastor that wears a tie! Yes, I'm referring to our very own Tri-City Bible Church!

I challenge you ladies – as I challenge myself – to do something very difficult each day - something that pushes you out of your own personal comfort zone.

I challenge you to be willing to die to your own preferences - to be willing to die to your own way of doing things. To be willing to be placed outside of your comfort zones and personal conveniences for the sake of the body of Christ – *the bride of Christ!*

Christ has done it all! And He instructs us – commands us – to love one another by dying to self:

*"<sup>34</sup> A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* **John 13:34-35**

Love of one another results in unity in the body. And our unity testifies to an unbelieving world that Christ Jesus is real! He exists! And He exists in us through his indwelling presence and power of His Holy Spirit.

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In order to meet our challenge to step outside of our comfort zones, and to practically love one another, we need goals! Without a goal, we return our the pattern of life and nothing really changes.

As we leave this time of fellowship and return to our lives, let's develop a new routine – a new “rut” - as ONE body. We'll need to be very deliberate to do this. We'll need to be very deliberate in reaching out to one another, getting to know one another, and introducing ourselves to one another.

How do we know we making progress? Well, let's use marriage as our example. The annoying “in-laws” become endearing. You begin to understand “where they come from” and why they act or react in the way that they do.

You develop a crush on the “crusty aunt”. The intimidation or fear you first had of her fades as you come to know that she's really a tootsie roll pop. She may have a tough outer shell, but in the middle is a soft center! You get to know her more deeply and understand the tough outer shell is simply her reserve or her shyness. She's not who you thought she was!

Do you see a pattern here? Many times our first impressions are simply that – first impressions! We process people through our context: our life experiences and our opinions and our preferences. And when we do this *without* love and *without* relationship, we are missing out on the soft center! We're missing out on the opportunity to know a heart softened by God – a heart of stone that God replaced with a heart of flesh (**Ezekiel 36:26**). A heart that He has placed here next to you, and a heart that is part of our church body.

Let's be deliberate to give one another grace! We're not giving one another the grace to sin, we're simply extending each other grace to grow. Church should be a safe place to grow up in Christ and we all need to grow up! Amen? Amen!

It's been said that we choose our friends, but God chooses our neighbors! ☺ The same is true for the believer. We may think we have chosen our church, but God is sovereign and He has chosen our family that makes up the body of Christ! We don't get a say in who is part of this family, or the greater body of Christ. And what a blessing that is! If we held everyone else to our own standard, we would be a church body of one.

Let me give you one last encouragement. Our unity must be pursued! The Apostle Paul tells us in **Romans 14:9**, “*So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.*” Unity must be pursued. Peace must be pursued. It will not come “naturally.” We pursue unity because unity is our witness to an unbelieving world.

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As Jesus prayed to His Father:

*22 The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.*

As we adjourn today, let's take a moment to celebrate our union in Christ and our union as the body of Christ. We'll do this by sharing a piece of wedding cake!

Since antiquity, weddings have been celebrated with a special cake. Ancient Roman wedding ceremonies were finalized by breaking a cake of wheat or barley over the bride's head as a symbol of good fortune. The newly married couple would then eat a few crumbs together.

Let's share this cake together as we celebrate what has been done for us *by* Christ and what God is doing in us *through* Christ! Let us pray.

Dear LORD God,

We praise You for the work that You have done in us before the foundation of the world to join us together *in Christ*. We thank You Jesus for Your sacrifice on the cross, which paid our sin debt and saved us from the wrath of God the Father. We rejoice in Your resurrection that gives us new life in Christ! We thank You, Jesus, for Your intercession on our behalf, and we thank You Holy Spirit for Your indwelling presence and power giving us the ability to love one another.

We ask that You, Lord, that You would keep us mindful of Your very great sacrifice and keep our hearts tender toward one another. May we be "ONE" and may the world know that Christ is in us, so that the world may know the You sent Jesus and loved us even as You loved Him.

In His name we pray. Amen.

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