

Faith Pulpit

Unity Versus Purity

The same conflict we saw in the Reformation can be seen in contemporary Christianity in North America and the rest of the world. Pastors in Baptist circles today (or heads of institutions or agencies) have choices to make when trying to expand and extend the influence of their church in the community or the constituency of their organizations. Aiming for unity (lowest common denominator of beliefs and/or holy living) will most often result in larger numbers of people, but it does not produce the fruit one might desire.

Martin Bucer typifies this struggle from the Reformation. He not only tried to achieve unity (reaching as many people as possible), but he also retained a passion for the purity of his church members. As he discovered, he could not have both. In trying to reach greater numbers, he had to dilute his message. Under Bucer's leadership (and the other Reformers), churches were little different from the world. Church membership was granted at birth, and requirements to keep it were not enforced. Holy living was not essential.

What Can We Learn?

What can we learn from this example? Churches and church leaders need to examine afresh what a New Testament church really is and of whom it is composed. A balance toward purity will ensure that the fruit of our ministries will exemplify God's ideals. Where does Scripture discuss the need for purity?

While many passages deal with purity, I want to examine one passage in a ministry context of committed believers. First Corinthians 5 was written by the Apostle Paul to a church in need of purity. In this chapter he addressed not only church leaders but also church members. The context is one of immorality, but verse 11 opens the passage to a number of possible applications: "But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is a fornicator, or covetous, or

an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person” (1 Cor. 5:11). He instructed them to be involved in the pursuit of purity by exercising discipline on a member living in outward, immoral sin that had become known in Corinth. Why would Paul want this individual to be dropped from church membership?

First, because this sin was a source of shame and grief to the church of Christ (vv. 1, 2). The church was to feel grief for the gravity of the sin and for the state of the sinner.

Second, because the congregation of the local church is the only authority needed to enforce obedience to Christ’s commands for a pure church (vv. 3–5).

Third, the purge for purity is the ultimate way to guard the sinner

(v. 5b). At the same time we need to remind ourselves that restoration of the fallen brother is also the goal of such discipline (cf. Matt. 18:15–17 with 2 Cor. 2, the context of which many commentators believe relates to the sinner of 1 Cor. 5).

Fourth, because tolerated corruption jeopardizes the whole church (vv. 5–7a). Sin that is not addressed in a member’s life will permeate and affect the entire group. Remember that small compromises now can turn into big regrets later.

Fifth, so we can approach Christ sincerely (vv. 7b, 8). These verses exhort us through the metaphor of the Passover that we should observe Christ’s commands in the ordering of the church so we have a clean conscience when we approach Him in worship. Let sincerity toward Christ and exaltation of truth be defining characteristics that saturate our fellowships.

Sixth, because impurity endangers the local church’s testimony (vv. 9–13). Yes, we are to reach the unsaved in the world with the gospel message, but not at the expense of our purity. The lives of church members should show a notable distinction from the lives of unsaved people. Though it may not be popular today, God calls His people to endeavor to live holy lives (cf. 1 Pet. 1:16).

What Is Our Priority?

Church leaders must come to grips with the fact that often the pure message of the gospel of Jesus Christ will not appeal to the vast majority of people in our society. Telling someone that he or she is a sinner standing in judgment by God will not win many friends. Sharing with someone that God required the blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ to pay the penalty for the sins of the world hardly sounds compelling to many today. Exhorting church members to live a life worthy of the calling we have received (Eph. 4:1) in sacrificial service to others is often not a good recipe for church growth.

Often pastors have the right motivation. Many have been toiling for decades in small ministries without the response they would like to have. Others, newer to the ministry, can be impatient for the

results they expected to see right away. However, believers and especially leaders in local churches today need to realize they have to choose a priority. On the one hand we could probably reach more people by choosing unity, but on the other hand that option almost invariably requires a distortion or delusion of the message.^{[1](#)}

The choice between unity and purity as illustrated by this example from the Reformation should cause us to do some serious soul-searching. We need to protect our church membership, especially new members, and be careful what is tolerated in their lives and beliefs. Frequently what seems little at the moment may change a church completely in the future. Often Satan has more patience than we think. Remember, you are not protecting your church's purity; you are protecting the purity of God's church.

Works Cited

1. Many philosophies embraced today by church leaders (whether in conformity to political correctness, church growth strategies, or other current issues) are based upon a secular worldview, which often result in a lower view of the Scriptures.

Dr. Ken Rathbun

VP for Academic Services; College Dean at [Faith Baptist Bible College & Theological Seminary](#) | rathbunk@faith.edu | [Other Articles](#)

Ken Rathbun (PhD, University of the West Indies) was a Baptist Mid-Missions missionary in Jamaica from 2002–16. He has preached and taught in many areas of the world and has served as vice president for Academic Services and dean at Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary since 2016. He and his wife, Cléa, have two young children.