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Your Church Is Too Small: Recovering a Biblical Ecumenism

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S. Michael Craven is the President of Battle For Truth and the author of Uncompromised Faith: Overcoming Our Culturalized Christianity (Navpress, 2009). Battle For Truth is dedicated to equipping Christians with a serious theological understanding of life and reality. For more information on Battle for Truth and the teaching ministry of S. Michael Craven, visit: www.battlefortruth.org

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When I began this ministry nearly ten years ago, it was often a challenge convincing Christians that there might be a problem within the church in America—that maybe, just maybe, the contemporary church had suffered missional drift of a sort, so much so that the we find ourselves more converted than converting. So prevalent is the effect that we frequently find ourselves drinking in the waters of consumerism, modernism, and more recently postmodernism, often unaware of their influence in our lives and, more importantly, how we understand what it truly means to be a follower of Christ.

Suffice it to say, this is no longer the challenge it once was. Most serious-minded Christians today recognize that the church has suffered a serious loss of relevance to public life, frequently watered down its message, and is all-too-often comfortable in a culture that is increasingly hostile to Christian truth. In short, Christianity has—to a large extent—become domesticated, seemingly more committed to preserving the values of Christianity than to following the Christ of Christianity.

Addressing some of the contributing factors to this condition has been the focus of this ministry since its inception. Also, I'm thankful the Lord has raised a multitude of prophetic ministries and leaders to confront the many complex issues plaguing the church today. One of those leaders is my good friend Dr. John H. Armstrong. John's heart and ministry has been captured by the rampant sectarianism and disunity common to the church today and so destructive to the church's witness. In response, John has authored what I think is one of the most important books written in our generation—Your Church Is Too Small: Why Unity in Christ's Mission Is Vital to the Future of the Church (Zondervan).

In Your Church Is Too Small, John presents a vision of the unity possible for Christians across social, cultural, racial, and denominational lines. As to the validity of John's vision, the esteemed J. I. Packer writes:

It is the one that views the visible church as a single worldwide, Spirit-sustained community within which ongoing doctrinal and denominational divisions, though important, are secondary rather than primary. In this vision, the primary thing is the missional-ecumenical vocation and trajectory crystallized for us by our Lord Jesus Christ in his teaching and prayer and illustrated in a normative way by the Acts narrative and much of the reasoning of the apostolic letters. ... The vision Armstrong offers ... is neither unanimity nor uniformity nor union (as he neatly puts it) but loving cooperation in life and mission, starting from wherever we are at the moment and fertilized and energized by the creedal and devotional wisdom of the past. Thus the internal unity of togetherness in Christ may become a credibility factor in the church's outreach, just as Jesus in John 17 prayed that it would.

Far from the liberal ecumenism of the 1960s, John shows how diverse Christians can (and must) maintain unity in obedience to Christ without necessarily surrendering their doctrinal convictions. As John so thoroughly shows from Scripture, when Jesus' followers seek unity through participation in the kingdom

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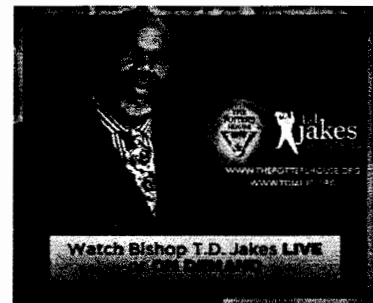
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of God and the mission of Christ, they provide an essential gospel-witness to a watching world. In John 17, Jesus prays to the Father, "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us." And what is the result of our being one? "... The world may believe that you have sent me (John 17:20-21, ESV). How often do we miss this incredibly important point? Jesus is clearly saying that our visible unity—our relationship to one another—is essential to showing the world that there is a God and He has sent His Son.

Your Church Is Too Small will challenge you to think in a profoundly biblical way about the visible church on earth. The church, beyond its representative institutions, is an organic body—the body of Christ—that gathers in many places, often holding different ideas, across many languages, socioeconomic strata, and cultures. There is, and always will be, diversity in the Lord's church by God's design (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-31). Sadly, this diversity has often been the source of strife, contention, and division rooted mostly in fear. John shows how this fear and division has been destructive to both persons and the mission of the church. *Your Church Is Too Small* doesn't get bogged down in our failure on this front but offers real hope—hope that God is now mercifully and graciously moving. John writes:

All evidence indicates that the church in our day is coming together in a new expression of both diversity and unity. This is a time of worldwide transition. This is happening through the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst, reminding us that the church, though not always good, remains holy because *it is the creation of God the Holy Spirit*. Within this new expression of the supernatural reality of the church, a growing emphasis on mission and ecumenism is being powerfully joined together in the practice of ministries, missions and churches. My purpose in writing *Your Church Is Too Small* is to help you begin to recognize this connection and embrace the outcomes which such a vision will bring.

When the church, according to Jesus, is living in visible relationship with each other, it is then that the world will know that God the Father has sent the Son. Is this not the desire of every faithful, gospel-centered Christian? I join with Dr. Packer in concluding, "I hope this book will not be ignored but will have the influence it deserves. Aspects of North America's future—aspects, indeed, of the honor and glory of Christ in this century—may well depend on whether or not it does."

If you long to see the witness of the church powerfully manifested in our generation then buy this book, read it, be transformed by it, share it, and teach it to others!

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For more information on *Your Church Is Too Small*, visit: www.YourChurchIsTooSmall.com

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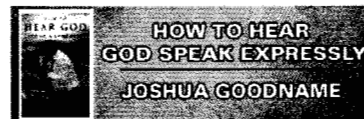
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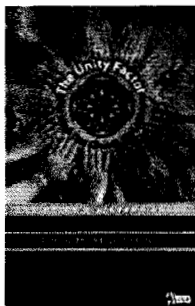
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The Unity Factor: One Lord, One Church, One Mission

Posted on [December 17, 2012](#) by [David Daniels](#)



John H. Armstrong
 Christian's Library Press, 2011
 ISBN: 978-188059590-9

It was his final Sunday as pastor when John Armstrong's expositional journey through the gospel of John brought him to the prayer of Jesus for his followers.

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20-23 NIV)

As he prepared to preach on this text he had read countless times, he “could not escape the truth of what Jesus was asking the Father. He prayed for the oneness of all his followers.” And while he had some sense of what it did mean, he was certain that it had “absolutely nothing to do with what is commonly called ecumenism” – the effort by Christian leaders and churches to create a movement of greater visible unity or cooperation. However, the Spirit of God was working in his own heart and life. Understanding and applying this call has occupied much of Armstrong's life ever since.

John Armstrong, the president and founder of [ACT 3 \(Advancing the Christian Tradition in the Third Millennium\)](#), has wide experience in many contexts. Having served in pastoral ministry for 20 years, and now, along with his ACT 3 responsibilities, he serves as adjunct professor of evangelism at Wheaton College Graduate School. He travels extensively, speaking and consulting with leaders and organizations around the world in a quest to promote “missional-ecumenism” – to ignite a movement of “world-changing leaders who will intentionally invest their lives in the kingdom of God.”

He seeks a “gospel-focused and Scripture-based” approach to Christian unity. Without question early Christians had disagreements as any New Testament reader readily recognizes, and yet, the defining identity for the disciples of Jesus is their genuine love for one another. Armstrong has embraced the spirit of Christ's prayer for unity and is on a quest to convince all believers of its vital importance. In the words of Jesus:

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. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35 ESV)

Of this Christ-spoken appeal, Armstrong writes:

*What distinctly marks those who belong to Christ? What truly distinguishes them from those who are **not** the church in this present age? It is not a cluster of doctrinal beliefs, as important as beliefs and doctrines are for healthy religious life. It is not a label or a particular social marker. Rather, is not the true mark of the church love? Furthermore, is not this love both Christ's love for his flock and their love for their shepherd and one another?*

*Love for Christ is, in a profound way, **the** defining mark of true Christians (1 John 3:11, 14, 16-18, 23). We can ask a myriad of questions about our own profession of faith in Christ. However, at the end of the day, it comes down to the same question Jesus asked Peter: 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' (John 21:15-17). And as John's epistle clearly notes, genuine love for Jesus will be seen in our love for one another (emphasis author's).*

Armstrong believes the only way Christians will adequately respond to the call for unity is to recognize three foundational truths – “three ones” as he calls them – one Lord, one Church, and one Mission. The first three chapters of the book explore the meaning and implications of these “three ones.”

Following his study of the “three ones”, Armstrong answers the question, “What does the unity factor look like?” Readers will see glimpses of Armstrong's personal journey toward his understanding of “missional-ecumenism.”

The final chapter provides practical counsel for those wishing to pursue the unity factor. “The vision we need to grasp,” writes Armstrong, “is one of visible unity in reconciled diversity”. For churches and mission organizations taking seriously the biblical mandate to unity, Armstrong provides six practical steps toward missional-ecumenism.

This is not a call to dismiss doctrinal convictions, nor is it an attempt to pretend that we do not have real differences. It is, however, a challenge to recognize that every person truly believing in the Lord Jesus Christ belongs to Christ and so to one another. And as such, we are one Church universal, and we have one mission to proclaim the gospel of this one Lord.

Timothy George, founding dean of Beeson Divinity School of Samford University (Birmingham, Alabama), in his Foreword to the book, reminds readers of English Baptist pastor William Carey's (1761-1834) call for a coordinated approach to world evangelization in 1810. Though nothing much came of Carey's call, Timothy George notes that 100 years later the International Missionary Conference convened in Edinburgh, and 200 years later the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization was held in Cape Town, South Africa. Timothy George observes:

The modern quest for Christian unity was born on the mission field. Its aim was not the building of a supra-ecclesiastical bureaucracy but rather the unhindered declaration of Jesus Christ, the sole and sufficient Savior of the World.

If you agree with John Armstrong, that the condition of the contemporary Christian church – “deeply divided by social, cultural, racial, and doctrinal fault lines” – is a serious obstacle to the unity Jesus prayed for, you must secure a copy of The Unity Factor. Whether or not you agree with his thesis, you cannot come away from the book without seriously considering just what Jesus was (and is) praying for.

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Loving the Churches around me

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*Ecumenism | Luminosa Award | Feature | June 2014 |
By Tom Masters*

When John Armstrong grew up during the 1950s in Lebanon, a small town about 25 miles east of Nashville, Tennessee, he did not think of ecumenism or building unity with your daily actions. He was prepared though. His father, a dentist, took care of anyone who came to his office, no matter their race or state in life. John comments,

“During my childhood I do not recall hearing discussions about... the struggle for justice or civil rights.” Only later, after he moved away to attend Wheaton College in Illinois, did he recognize his father’s extraordinary openness. He also came to realize what his father’s willingness to transcend racial stereotypes had cost, personally and professionally. His parents, devout Christians active in the Baptist Church, were not trying to make a statement. They were trying to live the Gospel.

His parents’ way of life — he describes his mother as “a living example of generosity, of trust in God’s providence” — launched him on a journey beyond rural Tennessee, but his life has remained rooted in their Gospel-based, concrete love. John says, “The only Jesus that most people will ever see is the one they see in you. The only way they can see this Jesus, who deeply loves them, is on the basis of your relationship with other Christians in a context in which the world sees God’s love, as they witness the New Commandment being lived out.”

Armstrong didn’t set out to become a minister. He entered a military academy and then the University of Alabama. During his freshman year, through the Campus Crusade for Christ, he learned “to personally share my faith in Christ.” That desire led him to Wheaton College where, he says: “The greatest thing that happened to me was my growing encounter with Christ through the church. I met faculty and students who came from diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, and denominations. My teachers participated in a broad dialogue about many things Christians did not agree about.”

After earning degrees in history and theology, he was called to pastor Baptist congregations in Bolingbrook, Illinois and in Wheaton. He married Anita and established a family with their two children, a son and a daughter. Over the next 16 years his work expanded greatly, ministering to his fellow pastors in suburban Chicago, preaching before ever-larger congregations all across the country, and traveling to Latin America and India as part of his missionary outreach. “As a good individualistic American Christian leader,” he comments, “I thought ministry was primarily about my private life and the fellowship of my own congregation. I knew I needed to love everyone in my congregation, and I knew that the

members of my congregation needed to love one another. What I did not know was what all this love had to do with other Christians or churches around me.”

In 1994, however, a deep change stirred within him. He had been preaching on the Gospel of John, a text he had explored thoroughly during his studies at Wheaton. One day, while reciting the Apostles' Creed during a Sunday worship service, he had a profound and unexpected experience. “I will never forget the overwhelming sense of God's presence, when I felt the weight of these words: 'I believe in one holy catholic church.' I had preached from John 17:20–23 just two years before, and the truth of this text had been disturbing me deeply. I was quite sure the unity Jesus prayed for had to be visible and intensely relational.”

In that moment, Armstrong's vision of the Christian church and his understanding of unity were transformed. He realized “that unity is not singing in unison and losing all our distinctiveness; unity is singing in harmony in a way that allows each person and tradition to enrich the others.” The passion for unity he felt deep in his soul led him to found ACT3 (“Advancing the Christian Tradition in the Third Millennium”), a network in which churches and leaders, guided by the Spirit, live out a vision of unity based upon Jesus's teaching in the Gospel of John. The ACT3 website, act3network.com, describes the network and lists its many partner organizations. He calls this work “missional-ecumenism.” “Missional,” he notes, “refers to the inner reality of 'sentness' shared by all Christians together. It is not so much what we do as what Jesus Christ is doing in seeking and saving the lost through us.” He describes ecumenism, the work of rebuilding the unity of the Church, as “the sign and the instrument of Christ's mission.” He recounts his personal journey and mission in *Your Church Is Too Small: Why Unity in Christ's Mission Is Vital to the Future of the Church* (Zondervan, 2010). The title, he says, does not refer “to the physical size of a church building or to the number of people who attend services,” but “to a mindset in believers that hinders the work of the Holy Spirit in mission and is contrary to the prayer of Jesus for our unity.”

Armstrong's commitment has come at a great personal price. In founding the ACT3 Network, he left behind what he had established during the first 20 years of his ministry. “I had to give up preaching to churches of five to ten thousand people. It has been an experience of dying to public ministry, reputation, and financial security. I have had to learn not to defend myself, but to listen to Jesus saying, 'Trust me.' But at every moment that seemed empty, even desperate, I have received providential provisions.”

Those “providential provisions” are demonstrated in John's becoming a minister of Word and Sacrament in the Reformed Church in America and in his active, public dialogues, such as his nationwide “Unity Factor Forums” in which men and women — especially millennials — train for leadership in missional-ecumenism. He works closely with the CityONE network, a mission to reach young adults in urban settings, and serves on the board of the Chicago Bible Society. In 2011 he traveled to Rome for informal dialogue on missional-ecumenism with the Anglican Center, leaders from the World Council of Churches, and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Unity. He consults with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and the Acton Institute. In March 2012, he and Cardinal Francis George of Chicago held a public “Conversation on Unity in Christ's Mission” before an audience of 1,200 at Wheaton College.

Because of his work in ecumenical dialogue, especially through the ACT3 Network, John Armstrong will receive the 2014 Luminosa Award for Unity. Since 1988 the Focolare Movement has given this award to individuals or groups who have distinguished themselves in promoting unity. The award ceremony, including a seminar entitled “How we can bear witness to the New Commandment,” will take place in June.