

November 29, 2010

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:3)

Dear friends:

Recently I contacted some of you to gather your perceptions and opinions about our UBF ministry and its leadership. Many of you sent candid and helpful comments. Others were not able to respond, and that's okay; I understand that life is full of pressing matters, and it is not always possible to answer unsolicited emails. Whether you were able to respond or not, I thank you for your concern and your friendship.

After receiving numerous responses, I compiled them into a memo which I sent to senior North American UBF leaders, including Dr. John Jun and Sarah Barry, prior to a leaders' retreat that was held November 19-21. In that memo, I listed eight reasons why some UBF members indicated that they were unhappy with the status quo:

1. UBF messages do not inspire them.
2. The gospel is being assumed more than it is being proclaimed.
3. UBF appears to be self-absorbed and inwardly focused, lifting itself up while ignoring the greater message of God's kingdom and unity with the larger Body of Christ.
4. A heavy focus on increasing UBF numbers and participating in certain outward activities as the primary measure of fruitfulness and spiritual growth.
5. Obedience to human leaders in UBF is still expected and demanded, and discussion of problematic aspects of UBF is still not tolerated.
6. In many ways, UBF still operates as a Korean church, maintaining a cultural climate that makes westerners uncomfortable.
7. UBF leaders continue to expect members to press on with fishing, one-to-one Bible study, and campus ministry, ignoring the demographic realities of who our members actually are, and ignoring other important ways of serving God.
8. The older generation is now telling the younger generation what their spiritual heritage and vision are without consulting them and without seeking renewal from the Holy Spirit.

At the retreat, I was able to raise these concerns in private conversations with many UBF leaders. These issues also came up in group discussions about the present and future direction of our ministry as we approach the 50th anniversary of UBF. Although we did not spend a great deal of time on these issues, they were discussed openly and frankly, and I believe that many of our leaders do take them seriously.

At the same time, we acknowledged that there is not a great deal that leaders can do to solve problems such as these. To "solve" a problem assumes that we can correctly diagnose it and select an appropriate remedy. But when we speak of the character and culture of a large and diverse ministry,

those assumptions are always questionable. Problems that are endemic to UBF are not everywhere alike, and actions that are intended to address some problems may create additional ones. UBF is not merely an organization; it is a living organism that was created by God and shaped by forces beyond our control. None of us has the understanding or ability to remake this organism according to our liking. If UBF is to change – and some change is inevitable – those changes cannot be brought about solely from the top down. Change must also occur from the bottom up and from the inside out. UBF is held together not merely by ideas and teachings, but also by relationships – bonds of love between family members and friends who recognize Christ in one another. Those bonds are sacred and ought to be preserved, even as society and our ministry changes in unexpected ways.

To those of you who are concerned about the present and future of UBF and who, for various reasons, may be dissatisfied with the status quo, I would like to offer some suggestions about how to help our ministry navigate this sea of change.

First, if you see something that you do not like or do not agree with, please take the opportunity to raise your concerns with leaders in a helpful and constructive manner. Christians from different generations and cultures see things differently, and we need to learn from one another in a spirit of mutual respect and love. Disagreements among us are a natural and necessary part of church life, and dealing with them in a mature manner helps us to grow both individually and as a community. Although we may think differently, we are still one in Christ, and we need to make every effort to live at peace with one another despite these differences. As the Apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:1-6:

1 As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. 2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. 3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Being “completely humble and gentle” (2) does not mean keeping quiet about issues that concern you. Rather, it means recognizing the diverse callings, gifts and perspectives of each person (11), building each other up for service (12), and achieving maturity and unity in the Body (13). It means speaking truth in love (15) and helping the different parts of the Body to work together (16). It means putting off falsehood and speaking truthfully (25), overcoming anger (26), building up others with kindness, compassion and grace (29-32).

In reality, of course, this is much easier said than done. Leaders are easily hurt. Their position is often a lonely one, because few church members understand what they actually go through. Leaders are often conflicted, being pulled in different directions by members who have drastically different ideas about what ought to be done. They are prone to misunderstanding and may become defensive if they think they are being unfairly singled out and criticized. In short, they are ordinary human beings with ordinary human emotions. Please take that humanness into account. In my own experience, I have found that raising difficult issues with leaders is not easy. You will sometimes be misjudged and misunderstood. You may be perceived as complaining. But disagreement is not the same thing as complaint. If you are misunderstood, be ready to turn the other cheek and root out all bitterness, as the author of Hebrews wrote (He 12:14-15):

14 Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. 15 See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

Second, make every effort to resolve conflict in the manner that Jesus prescribes. Disagreements about ministry issues are often exacerbated by interpersonal conflicts between individuals. If you feel that we have been truly hurt by someone, the correct Christian response is not to simply forget about it. Unresolved conflicts do not go away; if left unattended, they will come back to surface at unexpected times and in inappropriate ways. Rather, Jesus urges his disciples to pursue reconciliation as their first priority. In Matthew 5:23-24, he said:

23 Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

And in Matthew 18:15, Jesus tells us exactly how to do this:

15 If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over.

If that doesn't work, you may need to get other church members involved in a role of mediation (16-17). But getting others involved should happen later, after personal approach has failed. In my experience, the hardest part of resolving is taking that first step of privately approaching the person who hurt us. All too often, we try to replace that painful step with something else, such as suppressing our hurt feelings, talking to others about that person, gossiping and complaining about them, seeking to undermine their reputation, and so on. Those alternative ways do not help, and almost always make matters worse. History has shown that Christians are notoriously poor at resolving interpersonal conflict. In fact, this instruction in Matthew 18:15 may be one of the most frequently disobeyed commands in all of Scripture. Yet I have found that when we take this command seriously, pursuing reconciliation and friendship with those who hurt and oppose us, the experience is wonderful and transformative; this is the gospel of Jesus Christ in action.

Personally, I believe that the most pressing need in UBF right now is to open new channels of honest, respectful communication between people of different generations and cultures, to foster real friendship and loving community in Christ. Naturally, we find it easiest to communicate with people who think like us, who share our language and culture. Those kind of post-Babel relationships are comfortable, but they do not really help us to grow in our faith. Real growth and maturity comes when we engage in post-Pentecost relationships that span our human differences through the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church (Ac 2:1-12).

Thank you for your support and your prayers for our UBF ministry as we enter a new half-century. May the Holy Spirit guide us together as a multilingual, multicultural, and multigenerational Christian community that bears a living witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. God bless you.



Joe Schafer