

Union

Unity

Striving Side by Side
for the Gospel

Conrad Mbewe



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Unity

Striving Side by Side for the Gospel



Conrad Mbewe

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To Charles and Mavis Bota

*By your example you have taught me
true evangelical catholicity. Thank you for striving
side by side with me for the gospel for forty years.*

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Series Preface

GOSPEL INTEGRITY IS, I suggest, the greatest and most vital need of the church today. More than moral behavior and orthodox beliefs, this integrity that we need is a complete alignment of our heads, our hearts, and our lives with the truths of the gospel.

In his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul issues a call to his readers to live as people of the gospel. Spelling out what this means, Paul sets out four marks of gospel integrity.

First, he entreats, “let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27a). The people of the gospel should live lives *worthy* of the gospel.

Second, this means “standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (1:27b). In other words, integrity to the gospel requires a *united* stand of faithfulness together.

Third, knowing that such a stand will mean suffering and conflict (1:29–30), Paul calls the Philippians not to be “frightened in anything” (1:28a). He describes this *courage* as “a clear sign” of our salvation (1:28b).

Fourth, Paul writes:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. (2:1–3)

Paul thus makes it clear that there is no true Christian integrity without *humility*.

The simple aim of this series is to reissue Paul’s gospel-based call to an integrity that means living *worthily, unitedly, courageously*, and *humbly*. We need to recognize, however, that these four marks are not abstract moral qualities or virtues. What Paul has in mind are, quite specifically, marks and manifestations *of integrity to the gospel*. As such, the books in this series will unpack how the gospel fuels and shapes those qualities in us.

SERIES PREFACE

Through this little series, may God be glorified, and may “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit” (4:23).

Michael Reeves
Series Editor

Introduction

Avoiding Extreme Views of Christian Unity

AS HUMAN BEINGS created by a triune God, we are social creatures. We are meant to relate to other humans in a spirit of unity and mutual benevolence. We thrive best when we are in company with others and working together for the common good. Peaceful coexistence is of the very essence of our humanity, hence the well-known phrase “No man is an island.” We want to dwell in a peaceful environment. The subject of peace and unity is vital for us as human beings.

With the entrance of sin into the world, however, one of the areas of human existence most affected has been our ability to coexist in the very atmosphere that we all should long for. Sin has made us so selfish that it jeopardizes our efforts to live together in harmony. As we shall learn in this book,

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the coming of Christ not only reconciles us to God but also reconciles us to one another. The church, therefore, should be the place where this deep desire among human beings is realized. While unity is realized to a large extent among genuine Christians, there is a lot we need to do to realize this more fully in actual experience, as we shall see.

R. B. Kuiper wrote in his classic *The Glorious Body of Christ*:

The plight of the Christian church seems almost as sad as that of the world. To all appearances it, too, is a house divided against itself. It resembles a beautiful vase that, fallen from its perch, lies shattered in a thousand pieces. It is like a grand structure transformed by an exploding bomb into a tangled heap of wreckage. Unbelievable though it may seem, the church of Jesus Christ is really one.¹

It is this unity that we need to pursue.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians, he was full of joy because of what this church meant to him. It was the church that sponsored his missionary work as he made

¹ R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ: A Scriptural Appreciation of the One Holy Church* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), 41.

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his way into Europe. Even when he was imprisoned, this church sent him some much-needed supplies. At the time of his writing the letter, they even sent him one of their most able men, Epaphroditus, so that he could minister to Paul while he was in prison (2:25). Yet he knew that the church would be hindered in its work if it became dis-united. So he wanted them to not take unity for granted. Already two ladies in the church whose partnership in the gospel he treasured appeared to have been quarreling, and this reached the ears of Paul while he was in prison. So he appealed to them:

I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life. (4:2–3)

Central to the book you are reading is Philippians 1:27. It is an appeal for the church in Philippi to ensure that it would remain united both in fellowship and in ministry. Paul made this appeal based on the gospel. He wanted the Christians in Philippi to live lives worthy of the gospel they had come to know. He wrote,

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.

It was as the Philippians remained gospel-centered that they would stand firm in one spirit and strive side by side for the same gospel. This would happen whether the apostle Paul was among them or not.

This gospel-centered unity—or evangelical unity—needs to be emphasized among Christians no less today. You don't have to be in the church very long before you notice two wrong and opposite—even dangerous—outlooks on Christian unity.

Unity as Merely Organizational?

There are those whose chief concern is merely organizational. They want all who claim to be Christians and Christian churches to come together into some form of global Christian church. Appeal is often made to the words of Jesus in his high priestly prayer, where he said to God the Father, “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through [my disciples’] word, that they may all be one . . . so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John

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17:20–21). The argument is often made that this visible global unity will have an evangelistic allure, as was stated in the prayer of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, surely, who would not want that?

What those who make this appeal often forget is that this unity is meant for those “who will believe in me through [my disciples’] word.” It is a unity of those who have truly believed in the gospel. Whereas belief is in the heart and we should be inclined to accept those who claim to believe, their belief must be based on the gospel as it is revealed in Scripture. This gospel is based squarely on the finished work of Christ by the grace of God without human works added to it. So, for instance, we cannot be in unity with those who believe that the Virgin Mary is a co-redeemer with the Lord Jesus Christ or that we should be praying to her to appeal to her son to have mercy on us. That is a false gospel; it does not save. The unity that our Lord desires is based on what the apostles would proclaim, and we have it in the Scriptures.

There is another dividing line that those who cite John 17 often overlook. It is the fact that although faith is in the heart and therefore cannot be seen, it produces fruit that must be seen. When individuals are converted, they experience a spiritual transformation that is evident to those around them. Jesus saves from sin. If that has not happened, then people

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who make a claim to Christianity make a false claim, however sincere they may be. It was the apostle Paul who said to Titus, his protégé, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age” (Titus 2:11–12). The grace of God in salvation produces the fruit of holiness. We have no right to include in Christian fellowship individuals and churches that have long abandoned godliness. In fact, if we take the apostle Paul seriously, individuals who show a stubborn affinity for sin must be expelled from the church (see 1 Cor. 6:9–13).

Lastly, advocates for a unity that is merely organizational also forget a crucial phrase in the prayer of the Lord Jesus Christ in John 17. Let me quote verses 20–21 in full. Jesus prayed: “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, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” The prayer of our Lord was not primarily for organizational unity but for spiritual unity. That is what is meant by “just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you.” The very real spiritual bond between the persons of the godhead sets the precedent for unity among true believers. As we shall

see, this unity has been achieved by the Lord Jesus Christ and applied to believers by the Holy Spirit. The bond between true believers in Christ is organic rather than organizational. Our task is to maintain it.

We must be careful not to go to the extreme of assuming a unity with everyone who claims to be a Christian. We must ensure that the gospel people claim to believe in is the biblical gospel and that they are bearing its fruit. Commenting on John 17:21, John Calvin wrote,

Wherefore, whenever Christ speaks about unity, let us remember how basely and shockingly, when separated from him, the world is scattered; and, next, let us learn that the commencement of a blessed life is, that we be all governed, and that we all live, by the Spirit of Christ alone.²

Unity as Total Agreement?

The opposite extreme view of Christian unity is found among those who will work together only with those with whom they agree on everything—doctrinal and practical. They often divide over styles of worship, political and social issues, modes

2 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, vol. 2, in *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 18, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 183.

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of child discipline and education, church organization and administration, the use of social media, eschatological views, and so on. As you will notice, these are all non-gospel issues. Granted, our level of interchurch cooperation does depend on how united we are over matters of doctrine and practice, but there should still be some level of cooperation where it is evident that we stand for the same gospel. Refusing all cooperation with fellow believers is surely wrong. If such division were allowed, the New Testament church would have long split between Jews and Gentiles, because in those early days that was what largely threatened church unity.

The apostle Paul addressed this matter in some of his letters, especially Romans and 1 Corinthians. For instance, to the Romans he wrote:

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. . . .

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. . . .

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? . . . So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. (14:1–2, 5, 10, 12)

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The appeal of the apostle was that the Christians in the church in Rome should remain united even if there was a difference in doctrine and practice over these matters. Not all differences are worth dividing over. On some matters, you can agree to disagree.

I recall many years ago listening to a young pastor who had been called in the middle of the night to help resolve a domestic dispute that was threatening a marriage. “When I got there and was told what the issue was that had reduced the home into a war zone, I could not believe it,” he said. “It was so petty.” The older pastors quickly told the young pastor that petty issues often fragment families. Christian couples fail to live in harmony because of minor differences. They fail to differentiate between essentials and nonessentials. Sadly, this is not limited to homes. Too many splits between churches are due to the same failure.

As I hope to show in this book, we should be wary of divisions over non-gospel issues. This was the apostle Paul’s message to the Philippians, as we have already seen in Philippians 1:27. Whereas his primary concern at that time was for unity within the local church, the same issues that can divide a local church can cause divisions between otherwise godly men and women beyond the confines of the church. Conversely, the same principles that cure divisions in the local church can

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also cure divisions between believers outside the church. So, in this book, I will deal with the issue of evangelical unity in the wider body of Christ. As Mark Dever rightly says:

The church is one and is to be one because God is one. Christians have always been characterized by their unity (Acts 4:32). The unity of Christians in the church is to be a property of the church, and a sign for the world reflecting the unity of God himself. Thus, divisions and quarrels are a peculiarly serious scandal.³

What I propose to do is to bring the full orbit of the New Testament to bear upon the words of the apostle Paul in Philippians 1:27. He wanted to continue hearing of healthy unity among the believers in Philippi, despite the doctrinal winds blowing among them, some of which he would allude to later in his letter. The Philippians would need to stand firm in one spirit and one mind if they were going to strive together side by side for the faith of the gospel. Paul wanted this to be exhibited in their manner of life. That remains a huge calling for us in the twenty-first century as many of us lead the church of Christ. It is so easy to go to one of the two

³ Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B&H, 2012), 16.

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extremes I have described here, both of which fail to exhibit true evangelical⁴ unity. While we resist those two extremes, we need to be clear about what the genuine article looks like. What is *biblical* unity?

R. B. Kuiper warns against the two extremes when he says:

Extreme denominationalism [by which he means the tendency to view your church as the only one right and therefore separate it from other churches] accelerates division and thus obscures the church's unity more than ever but cannot destroy it. Extreme unionism [by which he means the tendency to view all institutions that claim to be Christian as truly Christian and to be brought into some form of organizational unity] spells the destruction of the church but will never be permitted actually to destroy either the church or its purity.⁵

Any Christian leader will face this challenge sooner rather than later. He will soon sense that he is being pulled to one extreme or the other. This is why it is important to be inoculated

4 The term *evangelical* is used in various ways today. I use it, together with the other authors of this book series, to refer to those who believe in salvation by faith alone, through grace alone, and in Christ alone.

5 Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ*, 49.

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early in one's ministry from both errors by being convinced concerning the true biblical balance when it comes to unity in the body of Christ. Again, it is not enough for leaders to safeguard themselves and their churches from error; they will also need to purposefully engage in intrachurch and interchurch activities that manifest this unity. What are those activities that glorify God as his people strive side by side for the faith of the gospel? I hope to touch on several of them in this book.

PART 1

The Indicatives of Christian Unity

Unity Is Accomplished in Christ

WHEN WE CONSIDER the subject of Christian unity, it is vital to start with the simple fact that unity is something already secured for us by God. Strictly speaking, our role is not to *become* united but to *remain* united, not to *attain* but to *maintain* unity. Jesus spoke of this unity when he said:

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. (John 10:14–16)

As far as Jesus is concerned, he has only one flock. In these first two chapters, I want to show how God has achieved this through his Son and his Spirit. He has done what was made otherwise impossible by the fall.

Christ Died to Secure Our Unity

When Jesus Christ died on the cross, he was not only reconciling us to God; he was also reconciling us to one another. This is well illustrated by Paul's explanation to the Ephesians about the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the church. And it can be applied to all the divisions we have among ourselves as human beings—gender, racial, national, financial, tribal, philosophical, and so on. Paul wrote:

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 us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. (2:13–16)

That phrase “but now” in verse 13 answers the hopeless divide that stood between the Jews and the Gentiles, due not only to their fallenness but also to their religious groupings. Gentiles were outsiders. They were thought of as Gentile dogs (as some Jews would refer to them), because they were “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (2:12). But all that has now changed in union with Christ Jesus and through his death on the cross. Previously, Gentiles who converted to Judaism were allowed to occupy the outer court of the temple, but now, Paul declared, they “are no longer strangers and aliens” but “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (2:19). The division that was once there is no more.

Commenting on this passage, John Stott writes:

This, then, was the achievement of Christ’s cross. First, he abolished the law (its ceremonial regulations and moral condemnation) as a divisive instrument separating men from God and Jews from Gentiles. Secondly, he created a single new humanity out of its two former deep divisions, making peace between them. Thirdly, he reconciled this new united humanity to God, having killed through the cross all the hostility between us. Christ crucified has thus

brought unto being nothing less than a new, united human race, united in itself and united to its creator.¹

The apostle Paul refers to Jesus Christ as our peace because he has secured the peace that was once absent. Life on earth, due to the fall, is characterized by hostility, antagonism, aggression, hatred, and enmity. Genuine love, trust, and peace are rare ingredients in society. Various prophecies about the coming of the Messiah emphasized that he would bring peace among us human beings. For instance, Isaiah wrote,

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (9:6)

As I have already stated, we are promised not only peace with God but also peace with one another. This is evident from the previous verses where Isaiah speaks about the breaking of the

1 John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press 1979), 102.

rod of the oppressor and the burning of the boot of the trampling warrior and his garment that was rolled in blood (9:4–5). This speaks of the end of hostility between human beings.

At the time of the birth of John the Baptist, his father, Zechariah, prophesied about all that the Messiah had come to do

because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the
shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.
(Luke 1:78–79)

He was speaking of the coming Messiah as one who would guide his people into the way of peace. And when Jesus was born, the angels sang,

Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is
pleased! (Luke 2:14)

You cannot miss this same message. The Messiah was bringing peace on earth.

Notice that the statement of the apostle Paul to the Ephesians is not an imperative but an indicative. It describes something done. Jesus “has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (2:14). It is not even a statement of hope for the future. It is a statement of fact about what has already been achieved in the past. The church is united despite the divisions that exist between various groupings in the world. In Christ’s death, he has removed that which divided us.

In the case of the Jews and Gentiles, it was the “dividing wall” of “the law of commandments expressed in ordinances” (2:14–15). The Pentateuch spells out what the laws and their ordinances were. They consisted of many ceremonial and civil laws. Among the ceremonial laws were offerings for sin, guilt, and peace, as well as grain offerings. Some of them were food, burnt, wave, and ordination offerings. The Israelites also had laws about the cleansing of lepers, the Day of Atonement, sabbaths, a year of jubilee, and so forth. They also had laws regulating their communal life and an entire penal code for various crimes. Any Gentile seeking to become a part of this life had many hurdles to clear.

Jesus fulfilled all of these laws in his life and by his death. Paul was able to say to the Colossians, “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with

regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col. 2:16–17).

One reason Jesus fulfilled the law in this way was to create one new man out of the two and thus achieve peace between them. The point was not that the Gentiles were joining the Jews in their religion or the Jews were joining the Gentiles in theirs. Jesus created a new body called “the church,” and everyone comes in on the same terms—repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:20–21). It is not Jesus plus something peculiar to your group but Jesus alone. *Solus Christus!* We all must say in the words of Augustus Toplady,

Nothing in my hands I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling.²

We must not miss the fact that the reconciliation of which the apostle Paul speaks here starts with our being reconciled to God. Granted, we are most conscious of our hostility toward one another. Yet there is a greater hostility than that. It is God’s hostility toward us because we have sinned against him. The

2 “Rock of Ages” (1776), <https://hymnary.org/>.

Bible says, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Rom. 1:18). Our greatest need is not peace between human beings. It is peace between us and God. We need vertical reconciliation much more than horizontal reconciliation. This is what Jesus achieved on the cross. Out of that reconciliation has flowed our interpersonal reconciliation. That was his twofold mission.

On the cross, Jesus took our place and paid the full penalty for our sin. He suffered the wrath of God in our place and discharged our liability. Our sins were transferred to his account, and he paid for them. His righteousness was transferred to the account of all who trust in him. Through his body on the tree, this transaction was fully accomplished. Since we all come to God in this way—Jew or Gentile, slave or free, educated or uneducated—we are one in him. We lose sight of our superficial differences, thus quenching our hostility. Peter Jeffery makes this point so vivid when he says:

Jesus did not die so that there would be Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, but that they should simply be Christians. The national tag is now totally irrelevant. In the same way whether we are young Christians or old Christians is also irrelevant. The age barrier disappears in

Christ as does the national one. If a man is a Christian he is my brother, and not just in theory but in reality.³

The apostle Paul finally asserted: “And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2:17–18). Paul’s point was that the unity in view was by Christ’s initiative, not only through his accomplishing it on the cross but also in his invitation to us all to participate in it. Bryan Chapell comments on these words of the apostle:

Somehow, deep within all believers there is the understanding that peace between the races and with God comes when, through the sacrifice of Christ, we see ourselves as a child in the lap of our heavenly Father and also see other children—red and yellow, black and white, precious in his sight—held with us in his arms.⁴

Jesus went to both those who were far off (the Gentiles) and those who were near (the Jews), inviting us to come in and

³ Peter Jeffery, *Opening Up Ephesians* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2002), 29.

⁴ Bryan Chapell, *Ephesians*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 119.

enjoy peace with God and peace with one another. Through him now we both have access to the God the Father in the same way. This is enabled by the work of the Holy Spirit, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Jesus Prayed for Our Unity

As if this work of reconciliation on the cross were not enough, Jesus also prayed and continues to pray for the unity of the church. In what we call his high priestly prayer in John 17, Jesus said 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, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 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. (vv. 20–23)

Interestingly, the high priestly prayer of the Lord Jesus Christ assumes his death and finished earthly work. It is as if he was about to ascend to heaven when he offered this

prayer, though chronologically he uttered it before he died. Considering his current mission and the future of his followers, he prayed for himself (vv. 1–5), the apostles (vv. 6–19), and then the rest of us in the church militant—that is, the church engaged in spiritual warfare this side of Christ’s second coming (vv. 20–26). It may surprise us that the first issue he prayed for concerning the church militant was its unity. He had already mentioned it when praying for the apostles: “And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one” (v. 11). I find it amazing that the unity of the church would be such a high priority to Jesus!

Since the Bible says that Jesus ever lives to intercede for believers (Heb. 7:25), we can assume that Christian unity continues to be his prayer for the church on earth. He will continue to pray in this way until he returns to wrap up history at his second coming. What is also comforting about this truth is that, whereas our prayers are not always effectual, because of our sins, the prayers of Jesus Christ have total efficacy. They are based on his finished work on the cross. The Father gladly listens to him and gives him what he requests.

Jesus was primarily praying not for an organizational unity but for an organic one—though, of course, organic unity

would be visible in the way we partner together as Christians and as churches in real terms. This unity also manifests itself in the way members of the human family have an affinity toward one another in genuine love. Brotherly love should pervade the atmosphere in the church. The very DNA of the church should be opposed to disunity and hostility. As Paul put it to the Corinthians, “God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another” (1 Cor. 12:24–25). This is what Christ was praying for, and it is what he has achieved through his death and his intercessory work in heaven.

This organic unity is fashioned after the unity in the Godhead between the Father and the Son, as Jesus mentions in his high priestly prayer. There is such an integration of persons in the Godhead that all three are one being, and yet they are still distinct. The Father is not the Son or the Spirit, and yet he is one with them. Likewise, the Son is not the Father or the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father or the Son, but each person of the Trinity is one with the other two. The three are distinct persons yet essentially one. They are three in one and one in three. From this organic unity flows their organizational unity. The three persons of the Godhead work together seamlessly in creation, providence, and redemption. In redemption,

the Father chose the elect, the Son redeemed them through his death, and the Holy Spirit regenerates them and brings them into the kingdom. There is a perfect working together.

The prayer of the Lord Jesus Christ in John 17 has no doubt been answered partially in history and will be fully answered when we are all glorified. The partial answer is what I will address in the next chapter as we see how the Holy Spirit works in human hearts to realize what Jesus worked for in his life and death on earth. R. C. Sproul explains in his commentary on John 17:

There's a very real sense in which this petition already has been fulfilled. Every person who is a Christian is in Christ, so if you are in Christ and I am in Christ, there is a real unity between us by virtue of our common union with him. This is true for all genuine believers. Even though we may differ on this point or that point, there is a real unity that binds us together—and that unity should be evident to the world.⁵

Jesus envisioned that the unity he prayed for would have an evangelistic effect. This is because of the gospel's effects in

5 R. C. Sproul, *John: An Expository Commentary* (Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2009), 305–6.

a world of sin, where human selfishness destroys relationships for personal gain. The world is full of marital fights, family feuds, intertribal and racial wars, civil strife, and international battles. Wherever you find human beings, there will be strife. But Jesus is saying that when the gospel reaches societies and the church is born, onlookers will be amazed at how people from diverse backgrounds have genuine love for one another. They will notice that these people come from different tribes, ethnic groups, and nations, and yet they are united. They will notice that they gladly worship and work together for a common cause. They will have to admit that something extraordinary is happening. They will be forced to give the claims of Christ their attention. How else can they explain the unity among God's people? Where does this love come from?

Jesus Gives Us Incentives for Unity

As human beings we function best when we are persuaded by logic and evidence. We will make sacrifices if we are convinced by logic that the benefits of an action are worth the sacrifice. With respect to Christian unity, several incentives flowing from the work of Christ in our salvation should cause us to pursue visible unity. They should make us eager to express this unity in practice. The apostle Paul referred to this when he wrote to the Ephesians:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called . . . eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (4:1–6)

Though I will discuss this in the next chapter as something produced by the Holy Spirit, seeing that this is all secured by virtue of Christ provides motivation to actively realize it in our daily experience. Paul set forth seven theological underpinnings on which we consciously build our unity in Christ. Let us briefly look at each one.

1. It is because of the work of Christ that there is “one body.” This was Paul’s favorite way of referring to the church, the body of Christ. All who ever become saved are brought into union with Christ and with other believers in this one body. Some may already be in heaven, but we still belong to this one body. We may live in different parts of the world and may not know each other, but we belong together in this one body.

2. It is also because of the work of Christ that we have “one Spirit.” We shall soon see how this one Spirit, who lives and works in all true believers, energizes us and enables all of us

in this one body to experience camaraderie in fellowship and in the Lord's work.

3. Because of Christ, we are now called to "one hope" in the final resurrection and an eternity with him in glory. Earlier in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul called it "the hope to which he has called you, . . . the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints" (1:18).

4. Jesus himself is our "one Lord," whom we serve in all our gospel endeavors. He is the one who has purchased us with his own blood. We are his. He is now exalted and has given us the Great Commission. He will return to reward us for our holy labors for him.

5. The Lord has called us to "one faith," which refers to the gospel-centered doctrines that regulate all our behavior. As Jesus said to his apostles before he went to heaven, those who are made disciples should be taught "all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20).

6. We are all baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. This refers to both the baptism we experience when we are joined to Christ and the water baptism by which we publicly identify with him, wherever we may be and whatever our social standing.

7. Finally, Jesus has brought us to worship the "one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." This is the purpose of our existence. It is why we are saved in

the first place. It is to this God that we come from all tribes, languages, and nations.

When you meditate on these seven truths, secured for us in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, it only makes sense that we should strive side by side for him. As intelligent and rational creatures, we should find our sense of logic compelling us to work together for the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

If we keep our eyes on Christ and his work on the cross for us, there will be less cause for the levels of disunity that have plagued the church across history all the way to our present day. This is what Paul had in mind when he challenged the Corinthians about their disunity over personalities. He wrote, “What I mean is that each one of you says, ‘I follow Paul,’ or ‘I follow Apollos,’ or ‘I follow Cephas,’ or ‘I follow Christ.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 Cor. 1:12–13). He was expecting them to answer in the negative, because only Christ was crucified for them, and they were all baptized in his name. Their divisions on party lines were ridiculous in the light of this. The Corinthians needed to concentrate on Christ, and Christ alone. He is the church’s one foundation.

This is why we sing:

The church's one foundation
is Jesus Christ, her Lord;
she is His new creation,
by water and the word.
From heav'n He came and sought her
to be His holy bride;
with His own blood He bought her,
and for her life He died.

Elect from every nation,
yet one o'er all the earth,
her charter of salvation:
one Lord, one faith, one birth.
One holy name she blesses,
partakes one holy food,
and to one hope she presses,
with every grace endued.⁶

⁶ S. J. Stone, "The Church's One Foundation" (1866), <https://hymnary.org/>.