

What is Christian Unity

Trinity Baptist Church Discipleship Training

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Introduction:

Division among Christians and churches has caused great conflict throughout history and it has greatly hindered the work of the church. The world today needs to see churches that are unified and confident; confident in what we believe and confident in what we are doing. They do not need to see ambiguity and uncertainty. But what is true unity? The subject of Christian unity is often a subject of great confusion. The purpose of this study is to bring some clarity to the subject. We will answer the questions: what is the source of true unity and what are the fruits of true unity?

Bibliography:

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- Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan; Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1994.
- Manton, Thomas, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, Birmingham: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2008.
- Murray, John, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955.
- Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are from the NASB: The Lockman Foundation, 1995.

Definition: What do we mean by Christian unity?

Christians are a diverse people. We come from every tribe and kindred and countless cultural traditions. Christians come from many different economic conditions. There are servants and masters, male and female, educated and uneducated; the list of differences goes on and on. Yet, Christians are a united people. Unity refers to agreement and oneness in the life & purpose of God's people as we continue as one body united to one Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ. Surely, this is the will of our Master—"that they may be one, just as We are one" (John 17:22).

I. What is the source of true unity?

- A. The chief source of our unity is our union with the Lord Jesus Christ
 - 1. Just as all men are united to Adam through both natural and federal headship (Romans 5:12), believers are united to Christ through justification (Romans 12:16-17).
We were redeemed by Christ alone and united with Him.
"Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation not only in its application but also in its once-for-all accomplishment in the finished work of Christ" (John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, page 162).

- a. This union was ordained from all eternity. John Murray wrote: “The fountain of salvation itself in the eternal election of the Father is ‘in Christ.’ The Father elected from all eternity, but He elected in Christ. We are not able to understand all that is involved, but the fact is plain enough that there was no election of the Father in eternity apart from Christ. And that means that those who will be saved were not even contemplated by the Father in the ultimate counsel of His predestinating love apart from union with Christ—they were *chosen* in Christ. As far back as we can to in tracing salvation to its fountain we find ‘union with Christ’; it is not something tacked on; it is there from the onset” (*Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, page 162)
 - b. Jesus has united us together as His body – the church is the Body of Christ
Romans 12:5 – “so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”
1 Corinthians 12:13 – “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”
 - c. This union in Christ is applied to us by the Holy Spirit
 He creates the unity that we enjoy
Ephesians 4:1-3 – “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, ³ being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”
2 Corinthians 13:14 – “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.”
2. Union with Christ also unites us with all others who are united with Him. This is true of the entire body of Christ. We are one body.
 - a. We share communion with all the body of Christ.
Romans 12:4-5 – “For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”
 - b. Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are called saints “with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their *Lord* and ours:”
 - c. This union with Christ involves all believers for whom Christ died and this body of believers is called the Church of Christ.
 Calvin: “The church is called ‘catholic’ or ‘universal,’ because there could not be two or three churches unless Christ be torn asunder—which cannot happen! But all the elect are so united in Christ as they are dependent on one Head, they also grow together into one body . . .” (*Institutes*, 4.1.2, page 1014).

3. Union also applies to the members of individual local churches. They share a common unity in Christ.
Calvin: “The church universal is a multitude gathered from all nations; it is divided and dispersed in separate places, but agrees on the one truth of divine doctrine, and is bound by the bond of the same religion. Under it are thus included individual churches, disposed in towns and villages according to human need, so that each rightly has the name and authority of the church” (*Institutes*, 4.1.9, page 1023).
- B. A second key source of unity is Doctrine
1. The early church was founded upon the Apostles doctrine. We have a common authority in the apostolic Word of Scripture
Acts 2:41-42 – “So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls. ⁴² And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”
 2. This was their source of unity – they were united upon Biblical truth
Christianity cannot be separated from Doctrine
Doctrine defines God, it defines man, it defines redemption, it establishes God’s standard for living
 3. Doctrine unites us – we believe the same things
1 Corinthians 1:10 – “Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.”
 4. True doctrine builds and edifies the body of Christ
This is the chief work of the pastoral ministry – Every pastor must recognize the importance of God’s Word, of doctrine in building up the church towards perfection.
Ephesians 4:11-16 – “And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, ¹² for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ. ¹⁴ As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; ¹⁵ but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him, who is the head, *even* Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”

5. This unity of doctrine is so important that Paul commanded the church to depart from any who cause division by teaching things contrary to sound doctrine.
Romans 16:17 – “Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them.”
 6. The church’s authority is founded upon this unity of doctrine
Calvin: “Where the preaching of the gospel is reverently heard and the sacraments are not neglected, there for the time being no deceitful or or ambiguous form of the church is seen; and no one is permitted to spurn its counsels, or make light of its chastisements;; much less to desert it and break its unity. For the Lord esteems the communion of His church so highly that He counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of the Word and sacraments. He also so esteems the authority of the church that when it is violated he believes His own diminished”
(*Institutes*, 4.1.10, page 1024).
 7. Disunity has always had a negative effect upon the witness of the Church of Christ.
Thomas Manton – “Chrysostom speaketh of a certain Ethnic that came unto him and told him, I would become a Christian, but there is such variety of sects among you that I cannot anchor upon anything as certain in your religion. Certainly nothing begets atheism so much as this. Men have suspected the gospel because there hath been such differences and strife about it, it makes them doubt of all to see distinct factions making the word of God ductile and pliable to so many several purposes. Therefore now a universal unity would much vindicate and recover the glory of Christ out of the hands of such a scandal, and be an excellent provision for the credit of Christianity” (*The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, Vol. 5, page 386).
 8. It is good for every church to be confessional—to have a statement that clarifies what the church believes concerning Biblical truth.
 - a. It is a declaration to everyone looking at our church of the things we hold to be true.
 - b. To be a member of our church a person does not have to believe every single doctrine of our confession but he must never disrupt the peace and harmony of our church with doctrines contrary to our confession.
 - c. As an expression of our unity every pastor, deacon, and teacher must be in full subscription to our confession.
- C. A third key element of true unity is humility
Ephesians 4:2-3 – “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, ³ being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Philippians 2:3 – “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; ⁴ do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.”

1. Humility brings a man to see himself properly before God.
Everything we are and have and are comes from God
KJV **1 Corinthians 4:7** – “For who maketh thee to differ *from another?* and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive *it*, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received *it?*”
2. Strife and contention find their root in pride
KJV **Proverbs 13:10** – “Only by pride cometh contention: but with the well advised *is* wisdom.”
NASB **Proverbs 28:25** – “An arrogant man stirs up strife, But he who trusts in the LORD will prosper.”
3. Not only does pride cause divisions among the brethren – it creates a division between us and God
James 4:6 – “. . . ”God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”
1 Peter 5:5 – “You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. ⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time”

- D. A fourth key source of unity is Love
Colossians 3:12 – “And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; ¹³ bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.”
1. Love strives to do the best for others – this seldom leads to strife.
 2. True love will lead to peace with the brethren
Ephesians 4:1-3 – “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, ³ being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

II. What are the fruits of true unity?

- A. Cohesion – in other words, there is oneness with the body of Christ
1. Paul says we are “fitted and held together”
Ephesians 4:16 – “from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”
 2. There is no such thing as individualism in the church
This is hard for Americans to grasp – we thrive on individualism

3. Notice the oneness of the early church
Acts 2:44 – “And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ and they *began* selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. ⁴⁶ And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”
 4. As the body of Christ, the entire body is affected by each individual part
1 Corinthians 12:26-27 – “And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if *one* member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. ²⁷ Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it.”
- B. We will have a unity of mind in the direction of the church
1 Corinthians 1:10 – “Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.”
1. True unity will result in our members being of one mind concerning the direction of the church – The word for “judgment” in this verse means “of one opinion.”
 - a. How can this be? Aren't there times when there are differences of opinion? Yes, and everyone is encourage to share their opinion.
 - b. But when the church speaks we all put aside our differences and labor for the common good of the congregation—this is the nature of unity.
 2. True unity will result in the absence of discord caused by evil speaking among the members
 3. True unity results in a people that exercise wisdom and self-control. They use their tongue to the building up of the church, not for tearing down.
 4. Where disagreements occur unity demands the seeking of peace.
 London Baptist Confession of 1689, Chapter 26:13 – “No church members, upon any offense taken by them, having performed their duty required of them towards the person they are offended at, ought to disturb any church –order, or absent themselves from the assemblies of the church, or administration of any ordinances, upon the account of such offense at any of their fellow members, but wait upon Christ, in the further proceeding of the church.”
- C. We will have unity of mind in the doctrine of the church
1. Unity puts us in agreement as to truth – absolute truth demands absolute acceptance and absolute obedience. We must, however, be able to discern the difference between essential and non-essentials.
 2. When a new Christian comes into our church he should hear the same doctrine no matter who he talks to.
 - a. Nowhere do we find this modern concept that it is OK for everyone to have their own ideas about the Bible.
 - b. Our church is free from many battles and divisions because we are of the same mind doctrinally.

3. We enjoy union with an association of churches who are united with the same mind doctrinally.
 4. Becoming a member of Trinity does not require total agreement in every doctrine – but we demand harmony
This is one of the great values of the New Members Class
Prospective members are introduced to all of our doctrines and practices – this enables them to make a decision whether or not they can place themselves under the authority of this church
- D. We will have unity in the pursuit of holiness
1. Church discipline is one of the marks of a true church.
Calvin: “I confess it a great disgrace if pigs and dogs have a place among the children of God, and a still greater disgrace of the sacred body of Christ be prostituted to them. And indeed, if churches are well ordered, they will not bear the wicked in their bosom. Nor will they indiscriminately admit worthy and unworthy together to that sacred banquet” (*Institutes*, 4.1.15, page 1029).
 2. With one heart each of us are striving after personal holiness and watching over one another lest we fall into the deceitfulness of sin.
 3. The continued charge of the New Testament (indeed all of Scripture) is separation from unbelievers.
2 Corinthians 6:14 – “Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?”
2 Corinthians 6:17-18 – “Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate,” says the Lord. “And do not touch what is unclean; And I will welcome you. ¹⁸ “And I will be a father to you, And you shall be sons and daughters to Me,” Says the Lord Almighty.”
- E. Christian unity results in each member looking upon his brother with love
1. Love for Christ results in love for one another
 2. We labor to respond to each other in love, patience, gentleness
 3. We strive after a spirit of cooperation
 4. You may be harmed by another, yet in love and humility you forgive

Reasons to leave a church and break fellowship:

- I. Doctrinal Reasons
1. When a church deviates from sound Biblical teaching on the essential doctrines of the faith it may be grounds for separation from the congregation.
 2. Such separation would occur after the church in question makes their position a part of their official statement of belief or a part of their practice. Such errant doctrine would need to be a denial of the Christian faith and the church declared to be a false church.
Grudem: “This would be a church which is no longer a fellowship of true believers, no longer a true part of the body of Christ, or no longer a place where those who believe its teachings will find salvation” (*Systematic Theology*, page 881).

3. In some cases a believer may choose to leave a church before the deviation from sound doctrine renders it a false church. This would be a matter of conscience

II. Practical Considerations

1. The time might come when a member ceases to have any meaningful fellowship within a particular church.
 - a. For example, if the church is hostile towards reformed theology. Your continued service in that church might be prove divisive. In such a case a person's continued membership might actually have a negative effect upon the unity and peace of the church.
 - b. Another example might be the church is not carrying out its mandate to evangelize the world and is resistant to change. After much prayer and consultation with the elders it might be determined that in the interest of unity termination of membership is the best course of action.
 - c. Grudem – "Christians may decide to separate from a parent church if, after prayerful consideration, it seems like staying in the parent church will very likely result in more harm than good" (*Systematic Theology*, page 882).
2. Another consideration: the member might determine after much prayer that God is sending him or her to give himself in service to another church. God gifts His people for service and places them within particular local churches. Great prayer and consideration must be given before changing churches and should be done in consultation with the elders of both churches.