

Foreword by Ligon Duncan

LUDER G. WHITLOCK JR.

“A compelling case.”

Timothy Keller

DIVIDED WE FALL

*Overcoming
a History
of Christian
Disunity*

Why can't all Christians just get along? *Divided We Fall* explains how we got to where we are—with an amazing mix of tears, anger, and hope.

—**Leith Anderson**, President, National Association of Evangelicals

Some of the best writing that a Christian author ever does is the result of a seasoned, lifelong perspective learned by God's grace through humbly walking in the truth. Luder Whitlock gives us such a perspective in *Divided We Fall*. He presents the biblical truth of the church with great care and then shows how schism has soiled the bride's faithful witness to Jesus. He honestly addresses the challenges of our time and gives some of the finest action steps I've read. I am constantly asked for thoughtful, constructive ways to pursue unity. *Divided We Fall* will become a highly recommended book for everyone I mentor in Christian unity.

—**John H. Armstrong**, President, ACT3 Network

If Christian unity is such a big deal for Jesus, why isn't it a big deal for the contemporary church? If Jesus thinks it so vital to the church's witness, why doesn't the church take it more seriously? These are the questions that have haunted Luder Whitlock for years and impelled him to write *Divided We Fall*. Inspired by thinkers such as Francis Schaeffer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Tim Keller, Whitlock makes the case that the church's greatest witness to the watching world is our observable love for and unity with one another. Our lack of unity and love destroys our witness and testimony to the world. Whitlock not only deftly shows how we have lost this unity and why recovering it is so important, but provides eight insightful ways to move toward more unity in the church. This is a challenging book, one that the church needs to read and heed. I found myself inspired and more passionate about unity and love after reading it. I can't commend it more highly.

—**Jim Belcher**, President, Providence Christian College

Sometimes one reads a book that is so clear, so wise, and so profound that one wants everybody to read it. *Divided We Fall* is that kind of

book. Luder Whitlock is probably the only person I know who could have written this book and spoken its truth so clearly. He's been there, done that, and been a significant part of the story about which he writes. This is a book for every Christian. Its prophetic message must be heard lest we remain divided and really do fall. Read it and share it with everybody you know.

—**Steve Brown**, Radio broadcaster; author, *A Scandalous Freedom: The Radical Nature of the Gospel*; founder, Key Life Network

A prominent Christian historian has observed that some evangelical leaders have too often indulged in “their fair share of back-stabbing, power-mongering, petty-minded polemicizing, gratuitous boundary-marking and schismatic devilment.” As a veteran leader of contemporary evangelicalism, Luder Whitlock has seen the damage that so much of this unnecessary fragmentation has done to the larger evangelical witness. His book is a bold cry of sincere lament and a clarion call for repentance, healing, charity, and visible unity before an unbelieving watching world. It should become required reading for pastors, teachers, and seminary students preparing for future ministry.

—**Michael Cromartie**, Vice President, Ethics and Public Policy Center

In *Divided We Fall*, Luder Whitlock demonstrates why he is considered one of the most widely respected leaders in the evangelical world. Clear, lucid, and balanced, this volume provides us with a compelling and much-needed vision for the unity of God's people, grounded in the Trinitarian gospel and the historical pattern of Christian truth. Recognizing that how we apply, implement, celebrate, and live out the Christian faith is as important as what we together confess, this important and timely publication calls God's people to repentance and renewal in fresh, constructive, and inviting ways. It is a joy to recommend this deeply hopeful and welcomed appeal to the Christian community.

—**David S. Dockery**, President, Trinity International University

Too often Christians have been divided over issues that are less than gospel essentials. What are the causes of and cures for these divisions? Luder Whitlock is more qualified than most to plead for the unity of the church. Without yielding one inch on matters of principle, he entreats the modern reader to consider the urgency of the communion of the saints. The appeal of this book is its biblical basis, combined with a very good survey of church history (including the more recent Presbyterian episodes), sociological insights, and his own most valuable and poignant personal accounts. His lucid writing style masks the deep learning and research behind these pages. Dr. Whitlock does not shrink back from some of the tough questions that he rightly anticipates: Was Luther a schismatic? What about denominations? What are the limits of tolerance? Some of the answers will surprise you. Others may disturb you. All of them will edify you. This is essential reading for our times.

—**William Edgar**, John Boyer Chair of Evangelism and Culture, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

My good friend Luder Whitlock has written an excellent book on a subject that has long been dear to my heart—the unity of the church. It covers biblical principles, historical and theological issues, and practical means of achieving reconciliation and love in Christ. His understanding of the issues is deep and right on target, and his presentation is well ordered to foster the unity he urges us to seek. I hope this book receives a very wide readership.

—**John M. Frame**, J. D. Trimble Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary

Jesus did not come to establish a dismembered church or a disunited body. He prayed for his disciples, and for us, that we would be one, as he and the Father are one, so that the world may believe. That prayer is still operative, and this book, from one of our wisest evangelical leaders, is an urgent plea for its fulfillment. Let us hear and heed.

—**Timothy George**, Founding Dean, Professor of Divinity History and Doctrine, Beeson Divinity School

Luder Whitlock has been acknowledged as a major leader in American and global evangelicalism for more than thirty-five years. Writing from this distinctive perspective, he makes a simple argument: to mark the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, it is time for Protestant Christians to affirm and take seriously the rich and energetic ecumenicity of those who led that Reformation. While not calling for an organizational unity like the failed mainline ecumenical attempts in the twentieth century, he does believe it's time for evangelicals to focus more closely on what they hold in common, especially in the face of increasing cultural opposition to the gospel that they all hold dear in the twenty-first century.

—**Jeffrey J. Jeremiah**, Stated Clerk, Evangelical Presbyterian Church

Luder Whitlock's *Divided We Fall* seeks to revive a dormant conversation about why and how Christians and churches must pursue ways to display our unity in Christ visibly to the watching world, as Jesus prayed (John 17:21–23). Building on solid biblical foundations, Whitlock explores the history of the visible church's unity and brokenness, and the complexities entailed in efforts to restore our communion in biblical truth. Some of his diagnoses of causes and prescriptions of remedies are self-evident, whereas others are provocative and controversial. In either case, Whitlock's voice rouses followers of Jesus from our complacency in a status quo in which Christ's church is, sadly, "by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed." This book merits reading with humble self-examination, as well as theological discernment.

—**Dennis E. Johnson**, Professor of Practical Theology,
Westminster Seminary California

Luder Whitlock's book is something of a *cri de coeur* for greater unity in the church. At a time when Christian leaders are almost obsessed about the culture, this book rightly argues that we will shape the broader society only to the degree that we make the Christian church what it should be. And in our present moment, the unity of the church is both a witness to the world and a necessity for its

strength and vitality. Luder's appeal comes from long experience and membership in several denominations. He marshals evidence for his contentions from the Bible, theology, history, and organizational literature. Not everyone will agree with every proposal or every argument, but overall the book makes a compelling case.

—**Timothy Keller**, Senior Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City

If you know Luder Whitlock, you can almost hear his audible voice as you read *Divided We Fall*. He illuminates the reality that although we often experience the church as a fractious mess, that is not the spiritual reality of the body of Christ. Whitlock calls the church to manifest the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace even in the absence of consensus on particular issues. As the culture continues to shift and the relevance of the church is increasingly called into question, visible unity becomes essential to the fruitful witness of Christ's people. This is a must-read for all those interested in the church's bearing a unified witness to the world and experiencing the joy of real community with fellow believers.

—**Carmen Fowler LaBerge**, President, Presbyterian Lay Committee; Host, *The Reconnect* radio show

If you've ever wondered why the church is so fragmented, Luder Whitlock, one of America's premier ecclesiastical statesmen, provides a compelling answer. If you've longed for greater unity in the body of Christ, here is balm for your soul. Whitlock's *Divided We Fall* issues a gracious plea for renewed concern for biblical unity. His thoughtful analysis of the church's ages-long proclivity for disunity is convicting yet encouraging as it challenges us to pursue a fresh commitment to Christian community. This is a much-needed study for both leaders and congregants, especially for us in the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions. *Divided We Fall* will help you to reassess and address the spirit of partisanship, independence, and schism that lurks within our hearts and the culture of our churches.

—**Peter A. Lillback**, President, Westminster Theological Seminary

Jesus thought and taught that the unity of those who call themselves by his name was and is extremely important. He prayed in John 17 that Christians might be one, just as he is one with the Father. He specified that a key goal of his entire ministry was that believers might be brought to complete unity. Why that specific goal? Because *then* “the world may know that you sent me.” Luder Whitlock’s superb book explores the full biblical basis for such unity, it traces the challenges to that unity throughout church history, and it makes very practical suggestions about how we might move toward accomplishing that for which our Savior prayed.

—**Samuel T. Logan Jr.**, Professor of Church History, Biblical Theological Seminary; Former President, Westminster Theological Seminary

Sometimes it seems that the greatest enemy of the church’s work is the church itself, with its propensity for division, backbiting, and even downright unchristian behavior. We should not be surprised that fallen human beings behave as badly as we do, since Christian theology predicts it. But how can the church become a stronger force for counteracting those tendencies and begin to more closely resemble the community of redemptive love that it is meant to be—and that it needs to be, today more than ever before? Luder Whitlock’s book is a resounding call for us to do better, delivered not in the hectoring tone of a would-be prophet but in the generous and encouraging tone of a learned and experienced friend, who offers us not only exhortations but also concrete and constructive suggestions. It is most welcome, and highly recommended for all, especially pastors and lay leaders.

—**Wilfred M. McClay**, G. T. and Libby Blankenship Chair in the History of Liberty, University of Oklahoma

Luder Whitlock is a trusted voice for Christians because he evidences deep wisdom, compassion, and maturity, as well as intellect and skill. This book calls the church to gospel unity in ways that will provoke you to think, ponder, and pray.

—**Russell Moore**, President, Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

This book speaks deeply into my soul. I know that Jesus calls us to work for Christian unity, but I am very distrustful of what people have in mind when they offer plans for pursuing that goal. Luder Whitlock understands all my misgivings, but he pushes beyond them with his profound call—backed by careful biblical thought, historical explorations, and moving personal confessions—for new efforts at healing and reconciliation. I want to belong to the kind of church he hopes for!

—**Richard J. Mouw**, President Emeritus and Professor of
Faith and Public Life, Fuller Theological Seminary

From a full lifetime of Christian service, Luder Whitlock has written an unusually insightful assessment of the contemporary American church and an unusually helpful challenge to follow Christ as head of the church. Biblically rooted, historically informed, and pastorally helpful, this book gracefully fulfills its purpose of strengthening unity and community in Christ's church.

—**Mark A. Noll**, Research Professor of History, Regent
College

The church of Jesus Christ exists in a perilous time, especially for those living out of a broad Reformed evangelicalism. More and more out of step with the values of culture, churches and denominations should consider it imperative to live and serve in a manner of unity, yet that often seems only a hoped-for reality. Dr. Luder Whitlock's book shines a thought-provoking and informative light on this subject. With years of experience across a variety of cultural and denominational lines, he brings wisdom, clarity, and practical ideas for turning the tide back toward the unity of the body.

—**David D. Swanson**, Senior Pastor, First Presbyterian
Church of Orlando

A powerful case for evangelical ecumenism (based on grace and truth), with special reference to Reformed Christians, from an esteemed insider.

—**Don Sweeting**, President, Colorado Christian University

As a long-term president of a seminary that draws students from many denominations, and from his decades of experience as a minister, Dr. Whitlock realizes the difficulties for the various branches of the church in realizing organizational unity. He therefore wisely advocates a working unity based on the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds and a common commitment to fulfilling the Great Commission. Dr. Whitlock suggests cooperative ministry directed toward achieving common goals in areas such as evangelism, education, ministries of mercy, and Christian witness to an increasingly secularized culture. All branches of the church lament the divisions of the church and long for some sort of unity before Christ's return. Dr. Whitlock's proposal is a step in the right direction.

—**L. Roy Taylor**, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America

Luder Whitlock's *Divided We Fall* is a work of such tender conviction, such loving wisdom, that its words carried my heart closer to Jesus and the church he loves and leads. It meant all the more to me because I know that Luder's concern for the unity of the church is not merely an intellectual idea, but a deeply held desire that he shares with Christ. I've seen this work out in my interactions with Luder, and it is evident in these pages. *Divided We Fall* is honest about what has divided Christians, and about the challenges we have in healing those divides. It is my hope that through this book entire communities will be motivated to earnestly seek unity, and find in the church and the Savior that Whitlock describes so sweetly the resources needed to do so.

—**Michael Wear**, Founder, Public Square Strategies LLC

Divided We Fall is exquisitely timed. It comes into print when hundreds of evangelically oriented congregations race to exit their denominational encumbrances. But where will they go, and how will they relate to one another after their departures? An increasingly secularized environment in the United States and a virulent Islamic assault beyond its borders portend persecution for those who profess that Jesus Christ is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

Author Luder Whitlock implores evangelicals to know that the time has come to cherish their common commitment to the Lord Jesus while graciously recognizing secondary differences.

—**Parker T. Williamson**, Editor Emeritus, *Presbyterian Layman*

Dr. Luder Whitlock is a seasoned, very well-respected leader in American evangelicalism. In this timely volume, he calls Christians “to live together as God has directed” and to repent of “unloving” attitudes toward each other (John 17). Dr. Whitlock’s sage reflections prod and pinch, encourage and exhort. In these contentious days, Dr. Whitlock’s volume constitutes a much-needed reminder that we as Christians should seek the unity of Christ’s church and love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, and minds and our neighbors as ourselves.

—**John D. Woodbridge**, Research Professor of Church History and the History of Christian Thought, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

DIVIDED WE FALL

*Overcoming a History of
Christian Disunity*

LUDER G. WHITLOCK JR.



P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

ISBN 978-1-59638-192-6 (pbk)

ISBN 978-1-62995-369-4 (ePub)

ISBN 978-1-62995-370-0 (Mobi)

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Whitlock, Luder G., author.

Title: Divided we fall : overcoming a history of Christian disunity / Luder G. Whitlock Jr.

Description: Phillipsburg : P&R Publishing, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017002371 | ISBN 9781596381926 (pbk.) | ISBN 9781629953694 (epub) | ISBN 9781629953700 (mobi)

Subjects: LCSH: Christian union--History. | Church--Unity.

Classification: LCC BX6.5 .W46 2017 | DDC 280/.042--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017002371>

This book is dedicated to

Jim Seneff
Tim Manor
David Lucas

Three friends who have shaped my life and ministry

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FOREWORD

AS I HAVE grown older and served longer as a minister in the church, I've come to believe that one of the blind spots in the recent history of my own denominational tradition has been a failure to devote as much attention and effort to promoting godly, biblical church unity as to preserving godly, biblical doctrinal fidelity. Few are good at both. Often those who are interested in doctrinal purity care little about church unity, and those concerned for church unity are prepared to sacrifice doctrinal fidelity for it. But this should not be the case.

For the last twenty years or so, I have been involved in a friendship that turned into a pastors' conference (the aim of which is to foster pan-Reformed pastoral friendships) called "Together for the Gospel." One of the things that we are trying to do is to foster *both* godly unity and doctrinal fidelity. The twentieth century has seen a number of failed strategies to promote unity among evangelical Christians. One is to unite around a mission and make theology a secondary matter. But the message and mission of the church are irreducibly theological, and so what eventually happens when this strategy is used is that the gospel itself gets thinned and diminished—or, worse, elastic.

Another failed strategy has been to try to unite around a few core theology affirmations and declare everything else secondary. For instance, "we all believe in the atonement, and so our differences on baptism shouldn't matter." But this view underplays the practical importance of much Bible truth in the everyday life of the church, and tends to promote an ambivalence about things on which we should be emphatic. It also fails to reckon with the fact that the

Bible's theology is systematic (whether people want to admit that or not!) and that truths are therefore interconnected with other truths. There are other reasons why Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Catholics believe what they believe about baptism, so you can't just isolate their beliefs about baptism and declare them inconsequential when they entail other important theological assertions.

My friends in "Together for the Gospel" have tried to go a different direction in promoting unity. We have candidly acknowledged our theological differences, and have not attempted to downplay the importance of those disagreements, while at the same time celebrating the significance of the very important things to which we share mutual theological commitments. We are agreed on the gospel, and not a scaled-down gospel, but a robust, biblical, full depiction of the saving work of God in Christ. We are also committed to historic, orthodox Christianity and to Protestant, confessional, Reformed doctrine. Yet there remain major differences—differences that have separated ecclesiastical traditions and denominations for centuries. We don't try to paper over those or pretend that they don't matter. We both celebrate what we share in common and celebrate that we still care about our differences, because those principled differences are the result of the fact that we all believe in truth and its importance for the life and mission of the church (my friend Al Mohler often jokes that we are among the last people on earth who can have an honest disagreement because we still believe that truth matters!). And we also deliberately pursue friendship and cooperation, consistent with our theological convictions, for the sake of the gospel and the glory of Christ in the unity of his people, his body.

I'm not claiming that we've arrived, or figured this out, but we are trying. That is one reason why I am so thankful for this book and its author. Much of what I know in this area I've learned from him. Not just from what he says, but from how he lives and what he does.

The important (and difficult) topic that Dr. Luder Whitlock tackles in this book is not simply one that he has researched. He speaks from conviction and experience. He has not merely thought about the unity of the church, or studied the unity of the church, but spent a lifetime promoting and cultivating the unity of the church in

a fractured and fragmented world. I have had the privilege of watching him do so for over three decades.

If you are a Christian leader, this book will push you hard and make you think. I have been reflecting a good bit of late on the contributions of Sam Patterson (founding president of Reformed Theological Seminary) and Luder Whitlock (his successor and the longest-serving president in the history of RTS) to the pan-denominational Reformed resurgence that has been slowly building over the last fifty years (both men played a major role, though often unappreciated). Two things about both men were key to their ability to foster a movement as well as to promote unity across denominational lines: (1) their unwavering commitment to truth and (2) their convictional kindness in dealing with others.

Dr. Whitlock has put this twofold principle into practice in serving in a number of influential positions in graduate theological education and international ecclesiastical cooperation. We could learn a thing or two about the pursuit of unity and community in the church from such a man. I was challenged and edified by reading *Divided We Fall*. I think you will be, too.

Ligon Duncan

Chancellor/CEO, Reformed Theological Seminary

John E. Richards Professor of Systematic Theology, RTS Jackson
Past Moderator, General Assembly, Presbyterian Church in America

P R E F A C E

WHAT IF THE Christian church radiated unity and harmony, mutual understanding and cooperation? What if believers everywhere joyfully worked together to achieve the mission mandated by God, ensuring that all people would be attracted to Christ and believe in him?

Sadly, reality is completely different. Although many wonderful Christians are involved in thriving ministries, the church that Jesus established has been plagued from its beginnings with bad behavior, including disagreements and divisions. Most Christians are familiar with the great divisions that resulted in the Eastern Orthodox and Protestant churches, but they are usually unaware of the nearly continuous stream of rifts and ruptures, on a local and global scale, that have troubled the church throughout its existence.

These problems should not be a surprise. After all, the intimate circle of twelve apostles most closely associated with Jesus harbored a traitor willing to betray the Son of God for a mere thirty pieces of silver. Barnabas and Paul, who collegially engaged in early missionary activity, disagreed so strongly regarding John Mark that they were no longer able to be a team. Once seemingly inseparable, they never worked together again.

Other problems in the church were also not slow in surfacing. For example, the Judaizers insisted that keeping the law was essential for all followers of Christ, so they demanded the circumcision of all Gentile converts. They couldn't, in good conscience, be faithful to their Jewish heritage and keep the ceremonial law without requiring circumcision. But Paul condemned the Judaizers' position as another gospel that to him was *anathema!*

Paul's follow-up letters to the churches that he planted during his missionary journeys also reveal those churches' wide range of problems. He straightforwardly confronted the Corinthians about the divisions developing in their community. They seemed proud of their partisan cliques, bragging, "I follow Paul" and "I follow Apollos" (1 Cor. 3:4). One super-pious group even claimed to be "of Christ." Their interest was personality driven. Clustering devotedly around the most appealing leader, they did not realize that they were not just arguing among themselves but also seriously wounding the church that Christ died to establish. They were too wrapped up in themselves and mesmerized by their leaders.

Intervening centuries have failed to deliver the church from disagreement and division on personal, congregational, and denominational levels. If anything, problems may have worsened, although historical distance makes that difficult to judge. Today, new denominations and independent congregations sprout more quickly than weeds in springtime. And the pace shows no sign of slowing.

Hundreds of denominations and thousands of independent congregations dot the American landscape, with new ones constantly popping up. According to the latest information, there are about forty-five thousand denominations globally—a number difficult to justify.¹ It can be quite bewildering to non-Christian spectators who no longer recognize all the labels. They encounter churches everywhere in all sizes and shapes, from St. Luke's Episcopal to Faith World to First Baptist to Kairos Church to The Holy Ghost Missionary Fellowship of Mount Zion. Many congregations seem to be going their own way, uncaring about others except when they appear to pose a threat. The proliferation of denominations and independent congregations is ample evidence of excessive fragmentation. Add the disagreements and factions found in many—if not most—of them.

"Why can't we all get along?" was the infamous, plaintive protest of Rodney King after his beating by Los Angeles police. That question

1. Center for the Study of Global Christianity, "Christianity in its Global Context, 1970–2020: Society, Religion, Mission" (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, June 2013).

pricks my Christian conscience as I survey the fragmented pieces of the church. Why can't those of us who believe in the authority of the Bible and the necessity of faith in Christ get along amicably? Why fuss and fight? Why refuse to associate with other believers? Is there anything we can do to heal our divisions?

There is always a reason behind discord, and that reason is usually the fault of someone else. But this is not the way it was meant to be nor the way it should be now. As Paul asked, "Is Christ divided?" (1 Cor. 1:13). Of course not! Then why are we so divided—especially when we know Christ prayed that we might be one as he and the Father are one?

This bothers me, and it should bother you. I belong to a denomination that is the result of a separation. I joined because I wanted to identify with a Reformed Presbyterian denomination that embraced the authority of Scripture and the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation. I have found a happy home here. But the longer I live, the more I realize that the most important identifying factor is not that I belong to this denomination but that I belong to my Savior Jesus Christ. I am a Christian first. That is what counts most. I resonate with "Just give me Jesus," because Jesus is the one who gave me a new life. Because I am united to him, I have become joined to everyone else who is united to Jesus. I am part of one new family, with many new brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Years ago, Carl Henry spoke of the "Uneasy Conscience of Evangelicals," referring to the way evangelicals avoided reaching out to meet the needs of others because they did not want to be identified with the "social gospel" of liberals.² Perhaps, in this twenty-first century, the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy and the conflict with liberal theology are sufficiently distant for evangelicals to develop an uneasy conscience about our lack of unity. Our consciences should be troubled as we survey the mess we have made of the church. We have wounded one another and limited our effectiveness as a witness to the unbelieving world.

2. Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

We can and should do better than this, asking how we can avoid the tragic mistakes of past generations. What does the Bible say? What steps should be taken? How can we become the church God wants his people to be?

My approach in the following chapters is to make that case as compellingly as I can. Chapter 1 describes the unity of the church in God's plan of redemption and its early expression. Chapter 2 builds on that by showing that there has always been an understanding that the church is one, although there may have been disagreements about who belonged and who didn't. Additionally, organizational differences and other expressions of diversity did not preclude that understanding or realization of unity. While division is repugnant to the Lord, diversity enriches God's people.

Chapter 3 emphasizes the importance of the communion of saints, especially in contrast to the loss of community during the final half of the twentieth century. Compounded by sectarianism and schism, various ecumenical efforts failed to heal the existing and added divisions, as chapter 4 explains. Chapter 5 mentions some of the well-known obstacles to achieving unity. The final chapter suggests some ways in which progress is possible and should be pursued.

Admittedly, the fragmented and partisan times in which we live are a challenge to any such uniting effort but provide all the more justification for it. Although it will quickly be apparent that this was written primarily for Presbyterian Reformed evangelicals, it should—and I hope will—be beneficial for a larger evangelical audience.

I don't expect this to ignite a new movement toward organizational unity, nor am I convinced we are ready for that. But we certainly need to learn to love each other and work together constructively for the gospel. There is room for more partnering, collaboration, and cooperation. Our increasingly partisan, polarized society needs such a model. The changing social and political circumstances make it necessary.

Some who hear this plea for unity, a call to a true communion of saints, will either see it as impossible and a waste of time or say, "Been there, done that." On the other hand, research has demonstrated that many Christians are weary of partisanship, politics, and polarization.

Making mountains out of molehills is distasteful to them. They yearn to ride the exhilarating wave of a missional movement that exalts Christ and brings believers together. They are open to constructive ways of joining together to do good and advance the work of the church. For many years, Billy Graham was the inspirational leader who brought about global cooperation in reaching people with the gospel. Who will assume that mantle now? And who will take up the baton at regional, denominational, and local levels?

Countless rejections and failures do not mean that it is impossible to come together and do great things for God. As our country grows less supportive of—and even hostile to—Christianity, it will be necessary to learn to listen to each other and work together for the common good. Negative attitudes toward evangelicals appear to be increasing, offering little encouragement for the future if the trend continues. These circumstances will pressure evangelicals to learn to love one another and live together constructively in spite of our deepest differences. If we can do that, we can also overcome many of the problems we have created for ourselves and open new doors of opportunity for the Lord's people to reach out redemptively to an unbelieving world.

This is a call to repentance for our failure to be the church God wants us to be. We tend to point fingers and shift blame to others. But many of the problems we face and challenges we have to overcome are our own fault. It is high time to admit it—sorrowfully. This is not only a call to repentance; it is equally a call for us to determine to live together as God has directed. It is not too late, but the clock is ticking. The time has come to tear down walls and build bridges.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ANY EFFORT OF this nature always owes a debt to others who have helped make it possible. I am especially grateful to Jim Seneff for granting me some time to work on this book as well as for his encouragement along the way. Without him, I undoubtedly would have remained in earlier stages of writing. He has definitely been the friend that sticks closer than a brother (Prov. 18:24).

Lauren Geiger has served as my executive assistant for many years, and her involvement in preparing and editing the manuscript—including indices—as well as making other improvements has been invaluable.

In addition, numerous friends and colleagues have read the manuscript and offered advice that considerably improved the final version including John Frame, Bill Edgar, Tim Keller, Michael Allen, David Dockery, Don Sweeting, Michael Cromartie, Leith Anderson, Jeff Jeremiah, Wilfred McClay, Joel Carpenter, John Armstrong, David Swanson, Roy Taylor, and Mark Noll. I am especially indebted to Dennis Johnson and John Woodbridge, who read the draft several times and offered helpful suggestions that significantly improved the final version. My thanks also go to the following individuals for their encouragement and insight: Jim Belcher, Ligon Duncan, Timothy George, Carmen Fowler LaBerge, Peter Lillback, Sam Logan, Russell Moore, Richard Mouw, Michael Wear, and Parker Williamson.

The two churches that I pastored as well as the denominations to which I have belonged have shaped my understanding of the church and given me hope regarding God's ability to do far more than we can. I am grateful to them for their vital role in shaping my ministry.

My wife, Mary Lou, has provided steady encouragement, including reading the manuscript and providing helpful observations.

I also want to express my appreciation to John Hughes, who has been a constant encourager as well as a valuable consultant during this process.

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BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

*A divided church in the New Testament sense of the word “church”
is something illogical and incomprehensible—as illogical
and incomprehensible as human sin.*

Lesslie Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church*¹

How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!
Psalm 133:1

*May the God who gives endurance and encouragement
give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ
Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify
the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Romans 15:5, 6

THE TINY CHRISTIAN church birthed at Pentecost shortly after Jesus ascended has become a vast global presence of diverse nationalities, gifts, and organizational expressions. It has been remarkably adaptive and resilient. The myriad identities of churches and denominations can be confusing, however, especially in their relentless change, which prompts people to ask, “What is the church? What is its purpose? How is it supposed to function? Where should we begin to best understand it?”

1. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church: A Defense of the South India Scheme* (London: SCM, 1960), 24.

Inevitably, the question of unity arises. People ask, “Why are there so many different churches and denominations? How can you justify all these divisions in the church? How did it happen? How can you decide which church is right for you?” These are reasonable concerns. If we ever hope to resolve them, we must begin at the beginning—with God.

The Triune God

The Triune God revealed in the Scriptures is the basis and model for the church and its unity. That is not to say that you cannot begin elsewhere, but any attempt to understand or achieve unity among believers that doesn’t begin with or ultimately find its basis in the doctrine of God is poorly grounded. In hindsight, it is now easy to see that John Calvin had the right idea when he began his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with a treatise on the knowledge of God. He understood how foundational the doctrine of God is to all theological and biblical study. That is where all theological inquiry and the search for understanding must begin. For this reason, it makes good sense to consider the doctrine of God, and specifically the Trinity, as foundational to our understanding of the church and its unity.

Most Christians would agree that as our understanding of God is enlarged through a serious study of the Scriptures and a growing awareness of his work throughout human history, we gain a more accurate comprehension of our world, ourselves, and what God expects of us. A correlative intellectual and spiritual (or heart) awareness develops, giving us a sense of what is right. The same could be said regarding what God expects of the church and our place in it.

In reflecting on many years of ministry and observation of the church in its various ecclesiastical forms, I have frequently wondered why the Trinity, although so important, has been an oft-neglected key to rethinking ecclesiology.

Fortunately, during the twentieth century, a renewal of interest in the social significance of the Trinity has led to substantial theological research and writing, enriching the conversation about the church and its unity—particularly during the last half of the

twentieth century. This interest in rebuilding spiritual communities—a reaction to the effects of social fragmentation that left people feeling alone or estranged—is understandable and has been a welcome development. The social or relational aspect of the church is often referred to as the “communion of saints” or “fellowship of believers.” That communion has its roots in the Trinity.

The initial pages of the Bible clearly reveal the existence of the one true God, who has eternally existed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Although the word *Trinity* is never used in the Bible, the Trinitarian message is consistently relayed to the reader: God is one, yet God is also three (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14). It is important to emphasize that as three persons, God is a relational being in whom unity and diversity are perfectly blended. Augustine put it well: “Each is in each, all are in each, each is in all, all are in all, and all are one.”²

Not only does the Trinity give insight into the nature of God, it enables us to comprehend the significance of and the value of diversity in all human relationships. Because God exists in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—we should quickly realize that he is just as much relational as he is sovereign, wise, just, or holy. Although it is not usually mentioned, the relational attribute of God deserves equal emphasis with his other frequently mentioned attributes. Although we cannot completely comprehend the profundity of the Trinitarian relationship, we may assert with confidence that God has eternally existed in an intimate, harmonious relationship as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Tertullian was the first of the church fathers to use the word *person* to refer to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.³ The doctrine of the Trinity was offered by the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325, and the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381). The latter explored it by stating: “There is one Godhead, Power and Substance of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost; the dignity being equal, and the majesty being equal in three perfect essences and three perfect persons.”⁴

2. Augustine, *The Trinity*, vol. 45 of *The Fathers of the Church*, trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 214.

3. Tertullian, *Apology*, 39.

4. *NPNF*², vol. 3, 138.

The Trinity is a triunity of intimate understanding, perfect love, and seamless functioning, as the three persons of the Godhead eternally relate to and exist in one another. Moreover, their personal identities are revealed in their reciprocal relationships. As would be expected, God's relational perfection is revealed in this unity. This is significant for the church because as we grow spiritually, we are being remade in God's image in many ways, including relationally. Relational factors, including our ability to work together harmoniously in spite of our differences, play a significant role when assessing our sanctification. You might say that the closer we are to God, the closer we should be to one another. This has, or should have, a direct bearing on the unity of the church; you would expect the unity of the Trinity to be expressed in the unity of the church.

It is also important to note the diversity revealed in the very nature of the Trinity, which does not come at the expense of unity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist as distinct and different persons with distinct and different responsibilities. This is consistently presented throughout the Bible. Herman Bavinck, aptly noting the diversity that existed prior to sin, says that this should lead us to conclude that it is "good and important also for the church."⁵ Differences can enrich relationships; diversity enriches the church. By contrast, it is hard to imagine life in a universe of clones.

Given our inclination to think of God as detached and impersonal, this is a timely corrective. The nature of God makes me the person I am: a person influenced by love—or its absence. God is personal and loving, longsuffering and forgiving. He is known by his love because "God is love" (1 John 4:16). That love has always existed within the Trinity. As Jesus said to the Father, "you loved me before the creation of the world" (John 17:24).

Love doesn't happen in the abstract; it needs an object. It is impossible to love nothing. Love needs someone to love and someone by whom we can be loved. Companionship, therefore, is essential to God's very nature because God is love. John's Gospel reminds

5. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 318.

us of this eternal relationship: “the Word was with God” (John 1:1) and “at the Father’s side” (v. 18). Not only was the Word in the beginning and essential to the creation of the world, the Word was with God. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were bonded together before the world came into existence.

Humans as Relational Beings

When you begin at the beginning—with Creation—the significance of the Trinity in the unity of the church becomes apparent. Let me explain how this is true. The first chapter of Genesis reveals that God created Adam and Eve in his image. In doing so, he created them as relational beings like himself. This becomes apparent in Genesis 2 as God observes Adam in the garden of Eden: “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18). At first glance, this may appear to be a simple statement that Eve was needed for the human race to continue. While that is true, there is more to it.

This statement would not make any sense unless God wanted to call attention to the fact that Adam was a relational being made for love and companionship. Why else would he mention being alone as undesirable (v. 18)? There is nothing wrong with solitude or being alone. The problem was that permanent solitude did not fit Adam’s nature because Adam was a relational being, just like his creator. Adam was created not only for a relationship with God but for a relationship with someone like himself. Without that human companionship, he was an incomplete person.

This is why God created Eve as Adam’s soul mate, taken from his rib. They could share love and life together in the garden of Eden. Male and female, they were united as one (Gen. 2:24). Consequently, their Edenic experience mirrored the relational nature of the Triune God as they enjoyed a beautiful, harmonious relationship with him and with each other. It also provided a model for marriage and all other human relationships, because God gave them that responsibility as part of what is called the cultural mandate (1:26–28). As J. Richard Middleton observed, “Imaging God thus involves representing and perhaps extending in some way God’s rule

on earth through the ordinary communal practice of human socio-cultural life.”⁶

Adam and Eve’s subsequent disobedience—eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—profoundly marred God’s image in them. Little did they realize how much would change if they disobeyed. The ramifications were huge, injecting alienation and misery into all human existence. Adam and Eve were jarringly expelled from Eden, and the idyllic relationship they had shared with God and with each other evaporated. Banned from Eden in shame and disgrace, they and their progeny faced an unexpected life of hardship and misery.

As bad as that was, the immediate effect of this dramatic reversal of relationships marked the advent of the destructive human relationships that would result from sin. From that moment, hostility, enmity, and various divisive forces became a constant irritant and threat to human life on earth. As an example, not long after God expelled Adam and Eve from the garden, their son Cain murdered his brother Abel: a painful, unintended consequence of their sin. These torments multiplied swiftly among the expanding human race.

Sin in its various forms divides and destroys. Misery and pain are its companions. Prejudice, deceit, manipulation, and anger become its weapons. Looking back to what happened in Eden, we now realize that alienation, estrangement, loneliness, and all other forms of flawed and broken relationships find their origin in that first sin of Adam and Eve. The rest of the Bible is an unfolding commentary about the damage that sin inflicts on human relationships. God offered a remedy to Adam and Eve in clothing them with skins to cover their nakedness and shame, which required the shedding of blood: a harbinger of the gospel. God also promised that one of their descendants would crush the head of the serpent, although the serpent would wound him in the heel in that confrontation (Gen. 3:15).

We acknowledge the hunger for companionship and intimacy

6. J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 60.

that remains an endemic part of human nature. People are by nature relational. The inner desire to belong emanates from this. In spite of repeated wounds and disappointments, an underlying desire for satisfying, fulfilling relationships continues to nest in the human heart. This desire is not only the foundation for marriage, family, and friendships but also the basis for groups and communities of every kind, including work relationships, childhood friendships, and club memberships. After their playing days are over, athletes often nostalgically reminisce, concluding that the part they miss most is the camaraderie, the locker room.

The good news is that through the gospel, God offers a way of escape as an alternative to our broken, sinful world. According to his redemptive plan, God is remaking into his image all who trust in Christ. Though it is a slow process, he rebuilds the relational dimension of life as part of that process, providing an opportunity for the believer to experience the fulfilling joy and lasting reward of redemptive community. Close relationships that weather the storms of life, imparting good feelings and fond memories, are irreplaceable.

This gives clarity to the gospel. Christ came to end the hurt, enmity, and estrangement caused by Adam's sin. To accomplish that, he became despised and rejected, suffering God's punishment of sin during his crucifixion so that we could be forgiven and accepted into his family. Although he cried out, "Why have you forsaken me?" on the cross (Matt. 27:46), his promise to those of us who believe is that we will never be forsaken (Heb. 13:5). We are reminded that he was killed outside the gate so that we can come inside to be with the Father (v. 12).

When we come to faith in Christ, we join those whose names are written in the Book of Life. Not only are our sins forgiven, our relationship with God is restored. We become part of his family. It is critical to understand that not only forensic but relational reconciliation is integral to our salvation. When our relationship with God is restored, our relationships with people will inevitably be transformed. Through faith in Christ we experience an innate desire, as part of his family, to repair relationships and form new ones by reaching out to one another (Gal. 3:28–29).

This puts into perspective the well-known hymn,

Blessed be the tie that binds
 Our hearts in Christian love:
 The fellowship of kindred minds
 Is like to that above.

We should expect to encounter happy, wholesome, enriching relationships among believers through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, just as we expect to experience it within marriage and family. If our relationship with God enables us to establish wholesome, flourishing relationships, it should translate into our marriage and family and then to all other relationships in the church as well as in business and the community. The radical change in Charles Dickens's Ebenezer Scrooge as a consequence of his dreams is the type of change that should occur among believers, dramatically affecting all relationships for the better and giving life a new glow. The transformation may be gradual or swift, but it will come; and when it comes, it will have a beneficial effect on those who are touched by it.

Theologian John Owen (1616–83) said that our communion with God consists of his communication of himself to us and our reciprocal response flowing from the union we have with him in Christ.⁷ We love him because he first loved us. This translates into our relationships with others. But it doesn't happen overnight, as is obvious from experience. By contrast, alienation and division, wherever they appear, are warning signs of spiritual deficiencies. Disagreements, anger, hostility, and estrangement are rooted in sin, and they are a persistent plague. The inevitable outcome, even among churches, is that relationships are constantly damaged and torn by deceitfulness, mean-spiritedness, and other bad behavior. Worse still, some days discord seems more prevalent among Christians and

7. John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 2 of *Of Communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 8–9. Owen became a friend of Oliver Cromwell in 1647 and was appointed vice chancellor of Oxford University in 1652–58. He was one of several ministers summoned by Cromwell to a meeting on church union in 1653.

their churches than in secular organizations. It shouldn't happen that way, but believers are sinners too. Some Christians are less spiritually mature and especially vulnerable.

If there were no sin, all relationships would be idyllic. It will be that way in heaven, but that's not the way life is now. However, we are not excused from our responsibility to maximize relationships to the best of our abilities. Right now, if we truly are in Christ, we must do our utmost to bring love, healing, and hope to all relationships. This is our spiritual obligation. Any less cannot be justified. The degree to which we cause rifts or divisions demonstrates our failure. When that happens, we should acknowledge and correct the problem as quickly as possible so that relationships are restored. Consistent, genuinely grace-motivated responses can make a huge difference in redeeming relationships.

One Lord, One Church

The unity and trinity of God also enable us to understand what God intends the church to be: one church comprising many believers who are marked by diverse gifts, organized in many different ways to carry out the Lord's will, and reflecting the harmonious relationship of the Trinity as they worship and serve. Mindful that it mirrors the attributes of God, the church should be one—harmoniously so, as is true of God. How beautiful and appealing this would be to a broken, hurting world!

Before we consider the rich trove of information the New Testament offers, we should not forget the Old Testament roots of the church. When God selected Abraham, he did so to lavish his favor upon those he planned to make “into a great nation” that would become his instrument to bless all people (Gen. 12:1–3). God established a covenant with Abraham, promising that in time he would give him and his descendants their own land and make them a witness to all the nations (Gen. 15).

Abraham's descendants as God's chosen people became the Old Testament precursor to the church (Isa. 43:20–21). God said, “I will . . . be your God, and you shall be my people” (Lev. 26:12).

At Sinai, God promised, “you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). When the church was formed, it was understood to be Abraham’s seed (Rom. 2:29; Gal. 3:29). Peter explains it this way:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Pet. 2:9, 10)

There were twelve tribes but only one people of God. There was a divided kingdom but only one people of God. They lived in different lands, under different circumstances, but they were always one people of God. As G. W. Bromiley has observed,

It is not for nothing that in the Old Testament the elect people of God, divided though it was into twelve tribes and later grouped into two kingdoms, consisted of a single race tracing its descent from a single progenitor. It is not for nothing that it was constituted the one nation by redemption out of Egypt, the deliverance at the Red Sea and the giving of the law at Sinai. There might be all kinds of breaches of this unity, from civil war on the one side to foreign marriages on the other. But nothing could shake the oneness of divine election, redemption, and overruling as focused in the common descent and national membership. The fact that Israel was a national unity clearly meant that it was to be one people.⁸

How is this expressed in the New Testament? When Jesus speaks of the church, the assembly, he uses a description rich with Old Testament meaning: the heavenly scene is a gathering from every tribe and language and people and nation, who are a kingdom and

8. G. W. Bromiley, *The Unity and Disunity of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 9–10.

priests serving God (Rev. 5:9; 7:9, 10). One day, Abraham and all the other Old Testament saints will join together in heaven for a great celebration with Peter and Paul and all believers from every time and place.

While recognizing the scattered existence of many congregations in various stages of development, the New Testament acknowledges only one church, comprising all those who are in Christ. Peter, in his sermon to the amazed crowd at Pentecost, emphasized that everyone who called on the name of the Lord would be saved (Acts 2:21). If they turned to Christ in faith, they would be accepted by God and become identified with his people.

The apostles preached this message wherever they went. New converts gathered into congregations to worship, learn, and be guided into service. Although multiple congregations and house churches soon existed in many cities and new ones were constantly being added, it is apparent from Paul's letters that there was and is only one church, whether in Philippi, Antioch, Corinth, or Thessalonica. These congregations were part of the one and only church planned and brought into existence by God. As Robert Banks has pointed out,

Scattered Christian groups did not express their unity by fashioning a corporate organization through which they could be federated with one another, but rather through a network of personal contacts between people who regarded themselves as members of the same Christian family.⁹

The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) was a definitive early meeting of church leaders that offers an example of how this was understood and implemented among multiple congregations in various locations. Several major misunderstandings and disagreements regarding differences between Jewish and Gentile Christians prompted the leaders of the church to gather in Jerusalem to discuss and pray about these

9. Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 48.

issues, seeking a decision acceptable to all (vv. 1–2). They gathered to address the problem because they realized that, as much as possible, they needed to be in agreement regarding belief and practice as followers of Christ.

Once they reached a conclusion on which they all agreed, the church leaders immediately determined how best to communicate their decision to all the churches. As they did so, it is apparent that they expected compliance (vv. 22–35). We may assume this is because of the sense of unity that characterized them. Why would they have felt obligated to resolve disagreements and seek conformity of belief and practice unless all the congregations considered themselves part of the same church? It seems reasonable to conclude that, in spite of the problems and tensions that existed from the beginning, there was a clear sense that the church was one because of its identity in Christ.

From time to time, vigorous disagreements occurred regarding who was right or wrong and who belonged or did not, but a consensus remained that there was only one church, of which Jesus was Lord. The strong inner coherence is unmistakable. As Jesus said, there is “one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:16).

Edmund Clowney has summarized the matter succinctly:

The abiding presence of the Spirit joins the church together into one. There is but one holy temple of the Lord, one body of Christ where the Spirit dwells. The Spirit binds the church together in the unity of a common life. In Paul’s letters this unity is applied especially to the joining together of Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:11–22). In the power of the Spirit, the church went from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. . . . The temple of God was no longer local, on the Judean hillside, but universal, wherever the saints gathered to join in heaven’s praise.¹⁰

A careful reading of the Bible inevitably leads us to conclude that there are essentially only two kinds of people, Christians and non-Christians, insofar as a relationship to God is concerned. If so, all

10. Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 53.

Christians belong to the one true church that has existed through all the centuries, and they will eventually be gathered around the throne of God in heaven. Their names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life (Rev. 21:27). They belong.

The single requirement for belonging to the one true church is faith in Christ. That alone is the determinant. A person's spiritual maturity, doctrinal discernment, giftedness, or cultural identity are not the determining factors, important as each of these may be. Neither are one's denomination or doctrinal distinctiveness—all those who genuinely trust in Christ, from the weakest to the strongest and the least to the greatest, belong to his church. How much they understand of God's Word and how well they obey are expressions of their spiritual maturity but not the basis for their inclusion in the church. As Peter said, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Acts 2:21).

Varying degrees of spiritual maturity and discernment cannot be avoided and should actually be expected. People are converted at different times, and they develop spiritually at different rates. This broad range of spiritual maturity, combined with a variety of gifts and contextual influences, will inevitably foster a wide spectrum of rich, colorful diversity. I am reminded of the experience of attending a Christian conference in Amsterdam that had representatives from more nations than any other event to that date, including the Olympics. That was diversity! That is the church!

On the other hand, as enriching and stimulating as it may be, this diversity can easily spawn misunderstanding and tensions that escalate into anger, hostility, and division, especially when confronted with adversity or sudden change. The periodic rifts and ensuing fragmentation of the church throughout the centuries illustrate this. From its inception, the church has never achieved more than an imperfect experience of its unity in Christ. Various problems and divisions have seemingly been perpetual. This has been painful and disappointing, but it is a reality that must be acknowledged. Yet it may also be argued that many of these conflicts were matched by equally endless and sincere—and sometimes sacrificial—efforts to restore unity.

Protestant churches of the Western world have proliferated and continue to grow incessantly, augmented by parachurch ministries and independent congregations. The multiplicity of denominations and Christian organizations does not, however, diminish that there is only one church of Jesus Christ, comprising all those who truly believe in him.

Finding appropriate ways to express the unity of the triune God remains the responsibility and challenge of the church in all its parts. Not only is it a responsibility, it is a priority. Those who desire to please the Lord cannot ignore their obligation to seek a joyfully united church until all believers are eventually united in praise around God's heavenly throne.

The High Priestly Prayer and Unity

As Jesus neared the end of his earthly ministry and the completion of his redemptive mission, he prayed for strength to finish the task for which he had been born, knowing that it necessitated his substitutionary atonement for sin. Yet as repugnant as it was to him as the sinless Son of God to suffer the full punishment of God the Father against sin, Jesus was willing to do it so that we could be forgiven and receive the gift of eternal life. He was willing to die on the cross to accomplish the purpose for which he had come. That much is well known.

It is also essential to notice that Jesus prayed that believers might, because of his atoning sacrifice, become one as he and the Father are one (John 17:21–22) and in doing so come to complete unity (v. 23). John had already mentioned Christ's desire for only one flock with one shepherd (10:16). This petition, particularly so near the end of his life on earth, conspicuously signaled the priority that Jesus placed upon the need for unity among all believers. This spiritual unity, transcending any kind of organizational unity, is paramount for believers who are one only in and through Christ and the truth revealed in him. This unity belongs to all believers in diverse nations, ethnicities, cultures, and church organizations. Apart from him, they are without God and without hope.

In John 10:11–18, Jesus referred to himself as the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. His sheep will hear his voice, know him, and follow him so that there will be one flock. Although a wolf may attack the sheep and scatter them, the good shepherd will gather them back together to remain one flock. Anyone who has cared for animals, especially pets, is aware of the emotional attachment that develops. This attachment is reflected in the good shepherd's effort to gather his sheep. It is significantly different from, for example, gathering rocks.

Elsewhere in the Gospel, John uses metaphors that heighten the awareness of a believer's relationship to Christ and to other believers. One is the reference to the vine and the branches. The branches connected to him are fruitful; the others are thrown away (John 15:1–8). In this illustration, Jesus appeals to the command to love each other as he has loved them (v. 12). He also promises them a place in his Father's house so that they can be there together (14:1–3).

Given such an undeniably clear emphasis by Jesus on the importance of unity, how can his people afford to neglect it or treat it lightly? Isn't it appropriate to expect that the unity and harmony of the Godhead should somehow find similar expression in our lives and relationships, including in the church? If John 17:21 were the only reference to unity in the Bible, that alone would be sufficient to obligate us to pursue unity. But it does not stand alone. Copious Old and New Testament texts emphasize the importance God places on the unity of his people who are united to him and therefore to one another.

We should be asking, "Why doesn't the unity of the church have a higher priority among Christians?" To the degree that we fail to express our oneness in Christ, we fail him and his desire for us as part of his church. What will it take to give this matter higher priority, even urgency?

The Church in Acts

The beauty of biblical unity is captured brilliantly in the description of the birth and development of the church in Acts. This was,

for all the newly converted Christians, undoubtedly the most exciting, wonderful experience of their lives; there was nothing else like it in the world. They had found faith and hope in Christ. In addition, they had discovered a powerful new *koinonia* that bound them together in love and service. It forged them into a dynamic community of renewed people that, through these unusual characteristics so different from any ordinary experience, compellingly appealed to those around them.

Acts 2:42–46 describes them as devoted to the teaching of the apostles and “to the fellowship.” This fellowship of the Spirit is a dramatically different way to describe what they had become. Their devotion was so strong that they met every day to encourage and help one another, nurturing their fellowship through the observance of the Lord’s Supper (or Communion) and prayer, as well as demonstrating the kind of generosity cited in Acts 4:32–35. They took care of the needy as if they were members of their own families. Incidentally, the word translated as “multitude” in verse 32 is also often used to designate “community,” including a religious community.

The important observation is that the Christians were one of heart and soul: that is, they were united. This made them very different from everyone else in that, as a new group, they had such cohesiveness. This sense of bonding into a community of love and service was extraordinary. Others remarked about the way they loved one another, especially as they experienced adversity. This fellowship of disciples in covenant with one another was a compelling witness.

As more and more people—Gentiles in particular—became Christians, the unity of the church was tested. In retrospect, that was to be expected of people from such different cultural backgrounds who were suddenly clumped together. Very early in the development of the church, Greek Jews complained that Hebraic Jewish widows were being favored when food was distributed. The response was quick, and apparently seven Greek men were appointed to help. There is no record that the problem continued (Acts 6:1–7). Cultural differences can impose many relational challenges, as those with experience will attest.

Peter provides a good example of a typical Jew relating to

Gentiles in the first century. He soon became convinced that if God forgave the Gentiles and accepted them as his people, then he too was obligated to accept them (Acts 10). It may seem a simple matter to us today, but because of their strong faith and the identification of that faith with Israel, accepting Gentile believers was a difficult hurdle for Peter and all the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem to overcome. But after hearing what had happened among the Gentile believers, the leaders at the Jerusalem Council—after much discussion and prayer—decided that it was right to accept Gentile converts. Given the convincing evidence, they had to acknowledge and accept what God was doing. As described earlier, once the church leaders had made a decision about the matter, they prepared an official communication for all the churches, including any new ones, about the conversion of the Gentiles. They communicated their acceptance of Gentile Christians and their expectation that all believers everywhere would welcome Gentiles as part of the church (15:1, 2, 22–35; 16:4).

As Paul notes, the right hand of fellowship was extended by the Jewish Christians to the Gentile Christians. It was a symbol of belonging (Gal. 2:9). This clearly communicated to everyone who was interested that they considered themselves to be one new believing community, followers of the risen Christ. Unless all these Christians scattered around the Mediterranean considered themselves to belong to one church, why would they be concerned to resolve disagreements, seeking conformity of belief and practice? The only answer that makes sense is that they *did* understand themselves to be bound to one another, just as they were now bound to the Lord by faith. Therefore, how they resolved these disagreements was of utmost importance.

Another testimony to the sense of community that characterized the new church is the offering that Paul began to collect during his missionary travels. The offering was intended to help the Christians in Jerusalem, who were being persecuted by Jewish citizens who regarded them as heretics and were determined to punish them for abandoning their faith. Paul thought it was necessary for all other Christian congregations to help them. He expected new believers

from all the churches, including Gentile Christians, to pitch in generously to provide relief and encouragement to their fellow Christians in Jerusalem, helping them cope with the persecution and impoverishment they were experiencing. Their generosity demonstrated the bond of unity in the church that was so reminiscent of the generosity offered to all believers immediately after the church was born at Pentecost (Acts 2:42–47).

On that day, people had gathered in Jerusalem from at least fifteen countries of the Eastern Mediterranean world, speaking an assortment of languages typical of the regions where they lived. They had returned to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost, one of the three great annual feasts of Israel. Suddenly they were attracted—or perhaps distracted—by an unusually loud noise caused by a small group of people who were, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, speaking their *languages*. Surprised, some of the foreign visitors wondered if the members of the group were intoxicated. That was soon determined to be an inadequate explanation of their linguistic abilities, which were too different and extraordinary for the initial explanation to suffice.

Peter gave them a quick explanation of what was unfolding by referring to Joel 2:28–32 and relating this phenomenon to the miraculous death and resurrection of Jesus. So stunning was the incident that about three thousand people were converted through Peter’s sermon, including some of the visitors and others who were listening. This dramatic Pentecostal occurrence and its mass conversions undoubtedly helped stimulate the rapid spread of the Christian faith. It brought a variety of languages and cultures into one new church and made it possible to transcend all the differences that otherwise would have separated them.

The church continued to flourish and grow until Stephen was killed (Acts 7:54–60). At that time, however, believers began to encounter a backlash of vicious persecution. Saul, in his Pharisaic zeal, was bent on destroying the church before it could become more of a threat to the historic Judaism that dominated Jerusalem. He was determined to perpetuate the faith of their fathers and the God of Israel.

This and later persecutions failed to destroy the church, however, although they continued for many years wherever the gospel bore fruit. An unintended consequence was persecution's contribution to the rapid spread of the faith throughout the Mediterranean world as well as the conversion of Saul himself, who would be transformed from chief persecutor to the greatest missionary of the church. Early Christianity quickly became a formidable missionary force that moved inexorably forward, regardless of adversity. In some instances, anti-Christian forces resisted or overwhelmed Christian advances, as with Muslim victories in North Africa. These followers of the Way, though a small group initially, would dramatically change the course of history as the church of Christ expanded everywhere.

Acts describes the birth and expansion of the church, highlighting important milestones and identifying marks. This book is critical to understanding the transition from the faith revealed in the Old Testament to that of the New Testament. There remained one people of God. Now the focus was on Christ as the fulfillment of all the promises to the people of God, starting from when God called Abraham to leave everything and follow him.

Ephesians and the Church

In addition to the highly informative narrative provided in Acts, the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians contributes to our understanding of the church and its unity. Remember that Paul spent three years establishing the church in this important Mediterranean city. His letter's primary emphasis is the church. Paul wants the Ephesian readers to know what a pivotal role the church has in God's plan to glorify himself in human history, which is his principal purpose. As God establishes the new community of faith, he uses it to point others to himself so that they can begin to comprehend the wonder and beauty of his character.

Of course, the question is: How will God accomplish this grand plan? By transforming each believer into his likeness. The more a person grows spiritually, the more he or she will become like him. God reveals his goodness and other attributes to the world wherever

those attributes are apparent in the lives of individual believers and in the community of believers. God will be glorified as this happens because it will enable the world to catch a glimpse of what he is truly like.

Paul, in helping the Ephesians understand the witness God intends for the church and for them individually, emphasizes unity among believers as an essential expression of genuine faith and vital component to achieving God's plan. He underscores the significance of relationships in the church, where our experience of unity both becomes an important measure of our faith and glorifies God.

That the unity of the church is a major motif in Ephesians is not surprising given Paul's history. After all, he was there when the church was born and soon became a major player in its growth. He personally witnessed the power of fellowship and unity among believers, and he painfully experienced the downside of disunity and divisions. For Paul, unity in Christ and the implications of that unity are not minor concerns or an afterthought.

Paul explains God's plan: to use the church as his instrument to glorify himself in the world by calling a people to love and serve him, and in doing so to be different from everyone else. This difference becomes apparent as his people grow spiritually and are conformed to his image in Christ, revealing his attributes to an unbelieving world.

Foundational to this spiritual transformation is the powerful experience of unity in all its richness and beauty. It is a unique sense of belonging that—similar to falling in love—is difficult to explain unless you have experienced it. The abiding presence of the Holy Spirit bonds believers to one another and bonds the church into one unified community.

Because this is true, Paul urges the Ephesians to live in a way that is worthy of their calling to follow Christ (Eph. 4:1). He uses similar phrases elsewhere regarding their obligation (Phil. 1:27; Col. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:12). Their lives should align with the goal God intends for them. Their calling as ambassadors of God is, therefore, one of responsibility as well as privilege and blessing as they call others to reconciliation—which is all the more reason they should prioritize

seeking and maintaining the unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3). Paul urges believers to do so because it is fundamental to their identity as Christians.

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph. 4:4–6)

When we are unified, loving and supporting one another, we act worthy of our calling as Christians. This is exactly what God wants us to do. But it will not happen unless we love each other and work hard “to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (v. 3), so Paul urges the Ephesians to develop the needed characteristics: humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love (v. 2). They are to serve so that “the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (vv. 12–13). Paul’s comments about husbands and wives, parents and children, and slaves and masters make more sense in this larger context.

In chapter two, Paul points out that the gospel not only removes the barrier between us and God, it also tears down the wall separating us from one another. Through his atonement, Christ smashed the barriers dividing us from God and one another, restoring us to fellowship with the Lord and creating a new fellowship of believers.¹¹ The point: as our distinctive community of faith mirrors God’s character, especially his oneness, it glorifies him. The experience of this loving, accepting community of believers is an easily underestimated dynamic, as Rodney Stark points out in *The Rise of Christianity*.¹²

Paul helps us see the result: a new identity and unity for all

11. Markus Barth titled his study of Ephesians as *The Broken Wall: A Study of the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Chicago: Judson Press, 1959).

12. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 73–94.

Christians, which transcends all earthly relationships and barriers such as family, church, and state (Eph. 2:14–22). Gentiles who did not have Jewish citizenship were foreigners to the covenants of promise (v. 12). Jews were well aware of the barrier that separated them from the Gentiles. The dividing wall that Paul mentions is a reference to the temple and the Gentiles' exclusion from it. Gentiles could be put to death if they attempted to enter the Holy Place, and of course only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place. The law, with all its regulations, would have served as a similar wall of separation. The reference to Gentiles as being “without God” in other Greek writings typically refers to those who do not believe in God or are forsaken by God.¹³ Certainly, they did not worship the true God.

In an unexpected and wonderful way, Jew and Gentile become one new body in Christ, who destroyed the barrier and reconciled them (Eph. 2:14–16). The mystery of the gospel is that these two formerly estranged, hostile groups are now brought together as one body. Moreover, the Gentiles became joint heirs with Israel (3:5–6) when they became fellow citizens with God's people, members of God's household, and a church in which God lives by his Spirit. In Galatians, Paul adds: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise” (3:28, 29). This was a shocking message for Jews—as dramatically powerful as saying to Protestants that Buddhists and Christians are one. That just isn't true, and apart from Christ it was impossible for Jews and Gentiles too. The gospel changed all these relationships.

It may not be obvious, but it is important to notice that in describing the oneness or unity of the church, Paul mentions the three basic institutions of society: family, church, and state. Each offers a powerful identity.

For example, I am an American. I often take that for granted, without much reflection on its significance. But the reality that I am

13. Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, vol. 42 of the WBC (Dallas: Word, 1990), 138.

an American is strikingly apparent when I travel to other cultures where people speak and behave differently. I become aware that I am in a different environment that is perhaps not a comfortable fit.

When cultural or economic differences are pronounced, the basic requirements of everyday living become quite challenging and tiring. I usually enjoy the experience of being away, but I am always glad to return home again. I still recall how, many years ago upon returning home from a month-long trip to Asia, that first long-awaited sip from a frosty glass of iced tea was one of the most refreshing experiences I'd had in a long time. I was comfortable being back home where I belonged.

I am also a Presbyterian and have been one for many years. Over time, I have learned from and grown to admire many other Christians, along with their denominations and organizations. In doing so, I have become aware of many differences and learned to appreciate them. This has also enabled me to appreciate and embrace all the more heartily the richness that is mine in the Presbyterian Reformed tradition. I love the confessional heritage, the emphasis on biblical authority, and the theological clarity. Additionally, I value the prominent role Presbyterianism has played in American history because I understand and appreciate the singular contribution it has made to our government, culture, and education. Because of this long association and the memories that attend it, I would find a change extremely difficult. I now realize that being Presbyterian is an important way that I define myself.

Family is also important. One's genes and family lineage cannot be disregarded; family ties and experiences are a defining factor in a person's identity. Parents and grandparents comment that a child looks just like some older member of the family. But it is not only the physical traits that are conveyed to successive generations; the influence of family on one's thinking and behavior can be even more pronounced. Family heritage, stories told about or by relatives—all become a part of the narrative. The varied experiences that come from growing up and living together in a family combine to form a distinct identity. As the years have passed, I've gradually realized that there is no way I can understand myself apart from my family ties.

Family gatherings and holidays help cement that realization. Hence the old saying, “Blood is thicker than water.”

When considering the fundamental importance of family, church, and state, it is easy to understand why Paul uses these three institutions to introduce us to our radical new identity as the family of God. You are, Paul insists, fellow citizens with God’s people, members of God’s household, and a church in which God lives by his Spirit (Eph. 2:19–22). As I have traveled to different places and engaged people in all parts of the world, I have come to understand how my identity in Christ creates a bond that, in many instances, would not have otherwise occurred.

Paul says that this new identity and sense of belonging displaces a former enmity and in the process transcends the unifying identity that is found in the three basic institutions of society mentioned above (vv. 19–22). God’s grace conquers estrangement and alienation, replacing it with a higher, stronger sense of identity and unity than would have otherwise been thought possible. Because of the gospel, Jewish and Gentile believers have unexpectedly become the new community of faith, the fellowship of believers. As we observe the difference in this new community, we recall how the wolf and the lamb lie down together in the New Jerusalem (Isa. 11:6; 65:25).

This provides Paul with the leverage he needs to urge all the Ephesian Christians to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). As he taught the Galatians, all who believe in Christ are children of Abraham and belong equally (Gal. 3:6–14). Paul’s argument is straightforward: God has rescued you from the hostilities and divisions of this sinful world to meld you into one new community—the church. Putting any unpleasant experiences behind you, Paul insists, you must demonstrate the reality of God’s love and grace as the one church of the one Lord through an expression of unity so common and consistent that it will be evident to all the world.

This unity does not require cloning or anything approximating it. Paul is well aware of the many ways in which we differ from one another, including our variety of personalities and gifts (Rom. 12:4–8; 1 Cor. 12:4; Eph. 4:7–12); he sees diversity as a benefit. His

emphasis in Ephesians, however, is on unity rather than diversity, while the Romans and Corinthians passages emphasize the value of diversity to unity. Paul's point is that diversity should not militate against the achievement of unity among believers. Rather, "as each part does its work" (Eph. 4:16), the complementary, harmonious blending of gifts and efforts should propel the body of believers toward the realization of "unity in the faith" as an expression of their spiritual development (vv. 13, 15).

While this kind of experience leads to a higher, richer grasp of the reciprocal fellowship and sense of belonging that occurs under the headship of Christ, the synergistic benefits are apparent. These in turn foster greater motivation to keep the unity of the Spirit to maintain—or possibly strengthen—the benefits. This also encourages those who discover the joy of this new fellowship to anticipate its full and final realization with all the saints in glory.

Unity and Diversity

If faith in Christ was the essential factor in forming the church, the fellowship of believers was next in importance. When a believer was joined to Christ, he or she also experienced a dynamic new relationship with other Christians—especially those they knew and lived with, as is clear from the description of the early church in Acts. They knew that they were now tied to one another regardless of their differences in background or gifts, which was important because there were indeed differences.

This fits quite well with Paul's metaphor of the body (Rom. 12:4–8; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:16). He notes that the human body is composed of many different parts with different functions and sizes, yet they are all one body, each part offering a beneficial function for the whole. The diversity is obvious but necessary. Ears are for hearing and eyes are for seeing. Speaking and thinking require other parts. If any part is impaired or lost, this has a negative effect on the rest of the body. Even the loss of a little toe affects a person. You are well aware if you have a toothache, an injured hand, or impaired hearing.

Granting that each part of the body is important, does it make

sense for someone to say, “We don’t need this body part, so let’s get rid of it” (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12–26)? Paul also adds that as each part does its work—that is, when it functions as expected—it benefits the whole body. This leads us to conclude that when believers are functioning as they should, it contributes to a harmonious unity of the whole body in Christ.

The diversity of gifts is a wonderful truth that should enrich and strengthen the church. Unfortunately, differences can also create tensions. Musicians, for example, don’t usually think like accountants or athletes, whose interests and priorities can be so different that they find it hard to relate to one another. When this happens, it can be difficult to work together. Paul was aware of the potential of different gifts to drive people apart. In the case of the Corinthians, this was a real challenge. The consequent divisions were unacceptable to Paul because they hurt the church and were a bad witness publicly.

Gifts should be harnessed and guided so that they are not only productive but contribute to both the development of the whole body and a greater sense of belonging or unity. Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4 emphasize the unity of the church while acknowledging its rich, mutually beneficial diversity. In Ephesians, diversity appears to receive greater emphasis as a contributing value to unity. Whether unity or diversity receives the greater emphasis, the truth remains that unity in diversity marks the church of Christ.

Love, Paul also notes, is the vital factor that binds the church in unity (Rom. 12:9; Col. 3:14). As Schaeffer rightly insisted, love is the mark of the Christian.¹⁴ It motivates Christians to bear with each other and forgive each other rather than allowing mistakes and misunderstandings to drive them apart. Love forges an enduring bond of unity that enables believers to transcend differences. In his first letter, John emphatically advocates that it is the major influence that binds believers to God and to one another. Without that bond of love in Christ, they don’t belong (1 John 4:7–21). They are outside, looking in.

14. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Mark of the Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 35.

Divisions

The first Christians possessed a unity that could never be achieved through mere human structures. This unity and the *koinonia* that marked the apostolic church were powerfully reinforced every time believers gathered in a communion of hearts and minds to observe the Lord's Supper. This common bond was reinforced in many ways. As believers willingly faced death from disease and persecution to help one another, the bond was strengthened. They also heard multiple warnings not to divide what God had joined together.

At least some of those warnings fell on deaf ears. A couple of examples are worth noting here. The first is the deceitful sin of Ananias and Sapphira that occurred soon after the exhilarating Pentecost experience and birth of the church, resulting in swift and dramatic judgments of death. Their unexpected deaths brought a stern warning to the nascent church to maintain the *koinonia* with integrity—a warning that sharply focused everyone's attention, apparently. Other disagreements and divisions followed nonetheless, as they have throughout the ages. The well-known disagreement between Paul and Barnabas that pushed them to go in different directions is another example (Acts 15:36–41).

Sadly, the prevalence of divisions in the Corinthian church threatened to rip it apart, jeopardizing its future. Paul, upon writing his first letter to the Corinthians, mentions it immediately, signaling its importance. In doing so, he refers to the report he had received from Chloe's household. Evidently, he was warned that the situation there had become so threatening that it could blow the church apart.

Although he had no firsthand knowledge of the situation, Paul took the message at face value, writing directly to the church to confront this serious problem. As he explained, he wrote “out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, . . .” (2 Cor. 2:4). They were preoccupied with their concerns about each other: who was right and who was wrong. They certainly weren't putting the Lord first. Moreover, their disagreements were many, intense, and persistent. There were disagreements about worship, the Lord's Supper, sexual immorality, the gift to believers in Jerusalem, and several other matters.

Paul wanted to persuade them to lift their eyes beyond these current issues to the Lord, leaving no doubt in their minds that these divisions, including the party strife that he cites, were scandalous and repugnant to the Lord (1 Cor. 1:10ff). Upset by their bad behavior, he scolded them with these words: “Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?” (v. 13). As far as he was concerned, there was no way they could please the Lord with such attitudes and behavior. Summoning the most powerful illustration he could, he reminded them that when they observed the Lord’s Supper, they confessed a unity in Christ. “Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (10:17). He admonished them that divisions between believers who are one in Christ are anathema to God, regardless of the reasons they may use to justify them.

Divisions such as those at Corinth obviously troubled the church and distracted it from its primary calling (1:10–17; ch. 3). The Corinthian Christians were an extraordinarily gifted, elite group. They had tremendous potential for good, but they succumbed to pride. As a result, there was no way their diverse gifts and other differences could be used to justify harmful divisions. Not only did they fail to enrich the church, they tarnished its reputation in the city.

Paul sharply criticized their divisive attitudes, demanding that they quickly rid themselves of divisions and contentiousness. He bluntly challenged them: “Is Christ divided?” (1:13). The expected response was, of course, that Christ is not divided, and there is only one church. Paul insisted that the wounds they had caused be healed quickly so that unity could be restored. They were in danger of destroying the church in Corinth, and he was attempting to confront them with the irreparable harm that was imminent (3:17). Addressing the numerous issues that needed attention, Paul eventually pointed them to love—a love for the Lord and for each other—as the answer that would enable them to restore *koinonia* (ch. 13). Love would help rebuild trust and healthy relationships. But without genuine love for one another, regardless of their gifts and great accomplishments, they would have nothing.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul addressed other problem

relationships—notably between Euodia and Syntyche, urging them to resolve their differences and reconcile with one another (Phil. 4:2–3). They were apparently women of great influence; the longer their estrangement continued, the more harmful it was to the church, threatening its peace and unity. Paul urged them to shift their focus from themselves and to become more interested in the good of others than in their own good (2:1–4). Their union with Christ was expected to carry over into their relationships with others who were united with Christ. If only they could agree with each other and be reconciled, it would be a wonderful example and encouragement to the whole congregation.

Selfishness and pride are frequent causes of friction. Thinking only about yourself and ignoring others leads to trouble. Unselfish, sacrificial love is the antidote. To that end, Paul reminded his beloved Philippians of their Savior, who remains the greatest example of humility and sacrifice. Pointing them to Jesus, he encouraged them to have similar attitudes of humility and willingness to serve. This would bring them closer together and give them a great reward. This is Paul at his best in modeling pastoral discipline. He reminds them that discipline should be pastoral and primarily to preserve the unity of the body. When that fails, then expulsion or excommunication follows.

Jesus established the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, sometimes called Communion, just prior to his arrest and crucifixion. This sacrament reminds us of our need for continued forgiveness, humility, and reconciliation with God and one another until we gather together as one family in heaven. James K. A. Smith writes:

The Supper is a gracious communion with a forgiving God; but it is also a supper we eat *with one another*, and that too will require forgiveness. God's design for human flourishing cannot be satisfied in isolation. As dependent, social creatures we are created for community.¹⁵

15. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 201.

It is impossible to observe this sacrament with a hardened heart and be pleasing to God. Paul warned the Corinthians that if they participated in an unworthy way—as they had been—they sinned against the body and blood of the Lord and in doing so brought judgment upon themselves (1 Cor. 11:17–29). The ancient *Didache* also warned similarly, “Let no one who has a quarrel with a companion join you until they have been reconciled, so that your sacrifice may not be defiled.”¹⁶ When we receive the sacrament, it is a time to confess sins and seek forgiveness, acknowledging how much we need the grace of God and one another. Together as one, we depart to serve the Lord with glad hearts, looking forward to the great communal feast in the kingdom that will come according to his promise.

This brief survey of the biblical record should leave no doubt regarding God’s gracious work in calling out a people for himself: the people of God. As we have seen, the body of Christ, the temple of God, and the fellowship of the Spirit are some of the ways the Bible identifies those who belong to God through faith in Christ. Found in different times and places, they are the one community of faith that we call the church.

16. *Ibid.*, 202. *The Didache* (first or early second century) is the oldest written catechism, and it shows how Jewish Christians viewed themselves and adapted their practices for Gentile Christians. Eusebius called it the “Teachings of the Apostles.”

DIVISION. POLARIZATION. STRIFE. That's life-as-usual in today's world. But it shouldn't describe the church.

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CHURCH MINISTRY / PASTORAL MINISTRY
ISBN: 978-1-59638-192-6

