

Unity

the Meaning

The Grand Theater at Ephesus.
Right: The baptismal in the baptisterion of the Church of St. John at Ephesus.



by Jerry Batson

UNITY among believers in the church lies at the heart of Ephesians 4:1-6. Three expanding levels of inquiry can help unfold the meaning of Christian unity. First, what is the meaning of the term itself? Second, how is the term used in the passage? Third, what other terms, ideas, and passages help fill out the wider meaning of unity?

THE WORD ITSELF

While the theme of unity threads through the entirety of the passage, the term for unity (*henoteta*) actually occurs twice in Ephesians 4, these two being the only occurrences of this term in the New Testament.¹ The prefix *hen-* is a form of the Greek term for “one.” Hence, we may think of unity as oneness, such as oneness in sentiment, purpose, and doctrine.²

In 4:3, the exhortation is, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit” (NIV). The church’s primary responsibility at the point of unity is not to produce it but to “keep” it. In the ideal setting, church unity is a maintenance ministry. Humans cooperate to maintain what the Holy Spirit produces.

In 4:13, the ultimate purpose of gifted persons in the church is to enable God’s people to “reach unity in the faith” (NIV). Faith can refer to the act of believing (a subjective matter) or to what is believed (an objective matter). “The faith” points primarily to the content of what we believe, such as “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3, NIV). Oneness in what we believe closely couples with knowing Jesus, God’s Son, and becoming mature, even to the measure of Christ Himself.

Thus in the New Testament the term for unity occurs in two phrases, “unity of the Spirit” and “unity in the faith.”



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THE PASSAGE

The significance of unity in Ephesians 4:1-6 occurs in relation to five moral qualities and seven doctrinal verities. The point of departure is a challenge for Christians to walk worthily of God’s calling (4:1). He calls us into His kingdom and unto His glory (1 Thess. 2:12). The practical outgrowth of the unity of the church finds expression in the larger context of Ephesians 4 in the enriching diversity within the essential unity (4:7-16).

MORAL QUALITIES

We are not left to figure out for ourselves how to go about maintaining the unity created in the church by the Holy Spirit. Before the exhortation to maintain unity, the passage sets forth five Christian qualities that promote oneness among believers:

humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and love (4:2). Obviously, the focus is not on structures of church unity but inner attitudes conducive to protecting and promoting unity. As is often the case in spiritual matters, human responsibility couples with divine enablement to produce the desired outcome.

“Humility” is a genuine sense of lowliness that accompanies a true estimate of oneself. Outside the Christian community, people viewed humility as a derogatory term that conveyed an image of low-mindedness or groveling servility.³ Jesus gave the word a virtuous connotation, describing Himself as “humble in heart” (Matt. 11:29, NIV). The idea

LESSON REFERENCE

FBSC: Ephesians 4:1-6

combines lowliness of mind, poverty, modesty, and mildness, as opposed to high-mindedness, wealth, arrogance, and assertiveness.

“Gentleness” is the disposition of loving submission both to God and others. Gentleness evidences itself in quiet restraint and steadiness in the face of provocation. The idea embraces considerateness, calmness, mildness, and moderation, as opposed to rudeness, violence, severity, and excess.

“Patience” is the quality of endurance and steadfastness in the presence of disturbing circumstances. Patience shows itself in a choice to forego personal revenge or anger in the presence of wrong.

“Forbearance” is the inner strength to bear with overbearing or perturbing people. Unity demands patience with disturbing circumstances and forbearance with disturbing people.

“Love” is the inner motivation for bearing with others in their imperfections, provocations, and aggressions. Given human weaknesses, imperfections, and inconsistencies, unity within the church demands relationships founded solidly on Christian love.

Believers must exert intentional effort to exhibit these moral qualities. To do so requires constant vigilance and inner diligence. Such inner qualities of the Christian life forge the “bond of peace” that ideally binds church members together as though collectively encircled by a spiritual belt or clasp.

DOCTRINAL VERITIES

The passage bases church unity on seven doctrinal declarations. Three of the seven expressly declare Trinitarian truths: God is one, the Lord (Jesus Christ) is one, and the Holy Spirit is one. The unity of the church is related directly to and flows from God’s oneness (4:6). Since God is one, His people are one and are to live with one another in full recognition of unity. God Himself is a unity



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in diversity—one God in three Persons. The divine pattern of oneness with diversity establishes the pattern for the church—unity with diversity.

Believers possess a secure doctrinal foundation on which to stand. That foundation informs and inspires the task of maintaining church unity.

“One body” refers to the church. Christ is Head of a single body, not a Gentile body and a Jewish body, an eastern body and a western body, a male body and a female body, or a liberal body and a conservative body. Christians are all members of the one body of Christ (1:22-23; 2:16).

“One Spirit” refers to the divine Spirit, not the human spirit. The Holy Spirit creates and indwells the one body. He empowers and guides that body, filling it and gifting it. The Holy Spirit works to mold diverse individuals into a harmonious congregation and helps diverse congregations see themselves as part of the one body of Christ.

“One hope” is the common aspiration of all members of the one body, which the Holy Spirit nurtures in us, being Himself the pledge or guarantee of Christian hope.

Above: A nymphaeum (public fountain) adjacent to the harbor baths at Ephesus.
Right: A view of the hillside houses of the wealthy dating from the 1st century A.D. to the Byzantine period at ancient Ephesus.

Believers’ hope includes seeing Christ face to face and sharing His glory and likeness, as well as entering and enjoying the life of heaven. God calls all Christians to this common hope (1:18).

“One Lord” is the Lord Jesus Christ, the heavenly Head of the one body, who gave Himself as the perfect sacrifice for its redemption. The pagan world typically thought in terms of many lords and gods (1 Cor. 8:5-6). Christian faith confesses Jesus as the one and only Lord.

“One faith” expresses the only way by which all persons come to the one Lord. We are all children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. Our trust in Christ unites all true believers in the knowledge that we all came to Christ the same way and on the same terms.

“One baptism” points to water baptism, the singularly appointed way set by Jesus’ example and command by which persons of faith publicly or outwardly confess their faith in the one Lord.



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The ultimate oneness in the universe is the “one God and Father.” His oneness is the rock bottom, foundational truth that underlies the church’s unity. Some nations and religions think they possess separate gods. The one true God is sovereign (“over all”), pervasive (“through all”), and experiential (“in all”).

OTHER TERMS, IDEAS, AND PASSAGES

While the word “unity” only occurs twice in Ephesians 4, the idea of unity finds expression through

other terms. Most obviously, the repetition of “one” in the seven doctrinal verities enriches the idea of unity or oneness in the church.

The idea of the church as “the body of Christ” (4:12) suggests unity, inasmuch as Christ does not have multiple bodies. As “the Head,” Christ is the unifying center by which “the whole body is joined and held together” (vv. 15-16), again conveying the thought of oneness or unity.

While the theme of unity pervades the New Testament, it finds unique expression in two other primary passages: Jesus’ prayer in John

17 and the early church’s example in Acts 2. Jesus’ prayer in John 17 enfolded His grand vision and passion for unity among His followers. Two themes stand out. First, Jesus held forth a divine pattern for Christian unity. The unity between the Father and the Son fashions the pattern—“just as you are in me and I am in you” (17:21, NIV). Believers have more than a pattern; we have divine power. Our ability to express unity rests in our participation in divine life—“I in them and you in me” (v. 23, NIV). The indwelling Christ is the essential power that makes it possible for believers to live in unity.

Second, Jesus prayed in light of the missionary or evangelistic purpose for church unity. He mentioned it twice—“May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (v. 21, NIV) and “may they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me” (v. 23, NIV).

The second passage sets forth church unity by means of the church’s example in Acts 2:42-47. The early believers’ unity found description in three expressions: “were together” (v. 44), “meet together” (v. 46), and “ate together” (v. 46, NIV). Furthermore, the idea of unity is implicit in the declaration that they “had everything in common” (v. 44). A key term for church unity is “fellowship” or *koinonia*. *Koinonia* is built on the root word for “common.” Christian fellowship demands common interests, values, purposes, and needs around which individuals feel compelled to come together. Church unity in Jerusalem had a fourfold focus: apostolic instruction, Christian fellowship, mutual meals, and corporate prayer (v. 42). **B**

¹A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman Publishers, 1930), 535.

²W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishers, 1967), 321.

³*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Zondervan, 1978), 55.

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