

One in Christ

A series of six Bible Studies on
church unity with notes for leaders

Derek Thompson
and
Raymond Williamson

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By

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One in Christ

Introduction to the Studies for Leaders

The aim of the studies is to show that church unity is very much a teaching of Scripture. In one sense, Christians are already united in Christ, but to the world, the church looks very fragmented. The studies commence by looking at the gospels to establish the importance of church unity, and then we look at the nature of the church as the body of Christ, a community with a mission, but one that is hampered by sin. We then turn to the issue of doctrinal differences, not pretending to resolve the problems, but to show that working for unity need not involve compromise to anyone's integrity. The closing study encourages Christians to follow the Spirit of peace in working for unity.

Allow 90 minutes for each study. The leader should decide beforehand which questions to omit if the group is running short of time. Each study consists of a number of short Bible readings followed by a discussion question or two. Ask everyone in the group to read one of the passages in turn to include everyone in the study. The leader should prepare answers to each of the questions prior to the meeting so that if people are having difficulty thinking of an answer the leader can provide his or her answer to help prompt ideas from the other group members. The questions are only offered as a means to guide and stimulate discussion and in a talkative group there may not be time or a need to deal with all the questions in detail.

The studies open with a short prayer by the leader. The closing prayer time can be longer and include personal matters. In a group where there are members new to praying in a group setting, the leader could ask someone to pray using the suggested Bible passage. This is also an opportunity to teach people how to pray using the Bible. Explain that you do not have to stay strictly to the words of the Bible, and might like to expand on them to make the prayer more relevant to the contemporary situation.

Each study can be printed back-to-back on a single A4 page as a handout to group members. I give permission for leaders to freely reproduce and distribute the studies.

I would like to thank Ray Williamson for reading over the studies and giving permission to use his two articles. These articles will provide valuable background for Bible Study group leaders.

Derek Thompson

One in Christ

*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free,
there is no longer male and female;
for all of you are **one in Christ Jesus.**" Gal 3:28*

1. Jesus on Unity

Open the study with prayer for Jesus' blessing on this series of studies of God's Word.

Introduction

When looking for guidance on a subject, Christians often turn to the gospels to see if Jesus had anything to say on it. Jesus thought church unity was very important and the gospels have a lot to say about the unity of Jesus' followers. Let us start our studies on church unity by looking at some passages in the gospels that relate to church unity.

Questions

1. Read Luke 12:49-53. Why do you think Jesus would cause division?

Is this his intention?

2. Read Luke 19:45-46. The outer court of the temple was where the Gentiles were permitted to worship, but it was being used as a market place. What do we learn from this incident about Jesus' attitude towards sin in the temple?

Does this relate to the church?

3. Read Matthew 18:15-17. Jesus teaches here about how to deal with sin in the church. Will this work today when there is always another church to attend?

4. The mother of James and John asked Jesus if her two sons could sit at Jesus' right and left hand in his kingdom. To find out what happened next **read Mt 20:24-28.** How did Jesus deal with this argument amongst his disciples?

Disputes in the church happen because of sin. In this passage, Jesus does not condemn his disciples, but explains to them how life is different in God's Kingdom and points to his purpose in coming into the world. What is your attitude towards others in the church who are not acting as you think Christians should act?

5. Read Mark 9:38-40. Those who were casting out demons in Jesus' name were not in the group of disciples following Jesus. Was there anything wrong in what they were doing?

Why was Jesus willing to overlook this? What was the disciple's attitude?

Do we display the disciple's attitude towards events held by other churches when we ignore them or speaking against them?

6. Read Mt 7:21-23. Sometimes a Christian will use this passage against people in other churches by saying that not everyone who calls himself a Christian is a Christian. Do you think this was Jesus' intention in this passage?

Who is to judge and when?

What assurance do we have that we are not deceiving ourselves?

7. Jesus taught in John 10:11-16 that he came not only to save the Jews, but also the Gentiles

Read John 10:16.

Does the "one flock" in this verse point to a universal church?

8. Read Jn 13:34-35. What is the intention of Jesus' New Commandment?

How do you think the world sees the church?

9. Jesus prayed for his disciples just before he was arrested. Read Jn 17:11.

Why do you think Jesus thought he needed to ask God to protect his disciples so that they would be one?

Do you think the timing and content of this prayer are significant?

10. Jesus then went on to pray for people who believe in him through his disciples' teaching.

Read Jn 17:20-23.

What reason did Jesus give for the importance of unity amongst his followers?

Close in prayer

Ask someone in the group to commence the prayer time by praying **Psalm 133**.

Pray using **Jn 17:26** thanking Jesus for making the Father known to us, for pouring out the love of God and the Spirit of Christ upon us. Pray that the Holy Spirit will give us Jesus' heart of love for others and a desire for unity with all his people.

One in Christ

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there is no longer male and female;
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Gal 3:28*

2. One Body

Open the study with prayer.

Introduction

In the Apostle's Creed it says, “I believe in ... the holy Catholic church.” Here “Catholic” means “universal”. The universal church includes all Christian congregations. In this sense, church unity in Christ already exists. The problem remains that the gospel proclaimed by the church is being compromised in the world's eyes by what it sees as disunity. Is visible church unity possible, or worth working towards? Firstly, we need to be clear on what we mean by the church.

The church is the community of God's people. However, this is an insufficient definition. For example, a Christian school could be described as a community of Christians. One thing that marks out the church as different is its mission to proclaim Christ in the world. There is another significant feature of the church, but it is something we try to hide. Church members are all sinners relying on the grace of God in Christ for salvation.

This study looks at the Apostle Paul's teaching on what it means for the church to be the body of Christ and how this community of saved sinners can live together in unity to proclaim the gospel to a needy world.

Questions

1. Read Ephesians 4:1-6. List the reasons Paul gives for keeping the unity of the Spirit?

- | | |
|----------|----------|
| a) _____ | e) _____ |
| b) _____ | f) _____ |
| c) _____ | g) _____ |
| d) _____ | h) _____ |

Baptism is a contentious issue in the church, but Paul says there is one baptism (vs 4). Some churches baptise infants, others only adults, some sprinkle water while others immerse the candidate in water, and some see baptism as metaphorical so that water baptism is unnecessary. Is there a way of accepting that there is “one baptism”?

2. Read Eph 4:11-16. What reasons does Paul give for God giving spiritual gifts to his church?

- | | |
|----------|----------|
| a) _____ | e) _____ |
| b) _____ | f) _____ |
| c) _____ | g) _____ |
| d) _____ | h) _____ |

3. Read Romans 12:4-8. In what ways do the spiritual gifts serve the body?

- a) _____ d) _____
b) _____ e) _____
c) _____ f) _____

4. The disunity in the Corinthian church made the body of Christ look uncoordinated.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10. What does Paul suggest as a solution (see also 2 Cor. 13:11; Philippians 2:2)?

5. Read 1 Cor 12:12-20. Are the members of the body equal? Are their gifts equal? Should we rejoice at the gifts of others? Think of some examples where the diversity of spiritual gifts in the church has helped it minister to needs more effectively.

6. Read 1 Cor 12:21-31. When you consider the gifts of others in the church, do you sometimes feel you have been passed over? If the church is one body with many parts, all of which are worthy of honour, how can we honour one another appropriately?

7. Read 1 Cor 13:4-10. How could “the most excellent way” operate within a church congregation to bring about more unity? What about between different churches?

8. Read Phil 1:27 & 2:1-4. Christ's life was characterised by his humility. In what ways does pride disrupt unity (see also Rom. 12:16)?

Close in prayer

Ask someone in the group to open the prayer time by praying for God's church using Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1:15-23 as a model prayer. Feel free to supplement or modify Paul's wording to make it your own prayer.

Pray that God will pour out his spiritual gifts on his church and equip her for the calling of proclaiming the gospel. Pray in this way for each individual in the group.

One in Christ

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there is no longer male and female;
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Gal 3:28*

3. Unity in Mission

Open the study with prayer that the Holy Spirit will be our teacher.

Introduction

The beginning of the modern ecumenical movement is usually traced to the World Missionary Conference of 1910 in Edinburgh (Note that ecumenism is concerned with unity within the church and should not be confused with interfaith dialogue or pluralism, which is about relations with other religions). Some 1,200 missionaries attended the conference. They were concerned that the lack of unity in the church was hindering their efforts to spread the gospel. The ecumenical movement came to realise that the mission of the church and the unity of the church belong together. “Otherwise, the credibility of the message is undercut by the non-credibility of the messengers.” (From “The Challenges of Mission-Shaped Ecumenism” by Michael Kinnamon of the School of Theology and Ministry, Seattle University, delivered at 8th National Forum of the National Council of Churches in Australia in Sydney on 6th July, 2013.)

The two world wars gave further impetus for churches to work together and found the World Council of Churches in 1948. At first, doctrinal differences between churches were at the forefront of discussions by the ecumenical movement. As churches made progress in understanding each other's theological views, the main obstacles to unity in recent decades are issues that are more practical.

Questions

1. “The church cannot be defined only by what **it does** (its service) or by what **it says** (its evangelism), but also by what **it is** (the character of our life together).” (Kinnamon, as above.)

How important do you think it is that the church's mission, its work and message, is backed up by its character?

Given that Christians are, by their own admission, sinful people is church unity possible?

2. The church is pictured in 1 Peter (and in Hebrews 3:6) as a spiritual house.

Read 1 Peter 2:4-10.

What in this passage speaks of church unity as already established?

According to Peter, what is the purpose of this unity (vs 9)?

3. Another image of the church is as a living temple where God is worshipped. This is used a number of times in Scripture. **Read** the following Scriptures and write down what you learn about being members of God's temple.

1 Corinthians 3:16-17. In vs 16 and 17 the Greek word for “you” is plural. Do not confuse this with the individual use of this image in 1 Cor 6:16.

2 Corinthians 6:16

Ephesians 2:21–22

4. In this living temple, unity does not imply uniformity and there is great diversity in the church. How do you relate to people in the church who are very different to you? How do you deal with personal disagreements over church matters that you have with other believers?

5. **Read James 1:22-27 and 2:26.**

Is James saying the church's mission needs to combine service with its message?

Does your church actively get involved in things like social justice issues, environmental issues, and moral concerns? Does it emphasise evangelism or the gifts of the Spirit?

6. “The purpose of mission is not just the spread of the church but participation in all that God is doing—which, if scripture is our guide, includes opposing those forces that make for poverty and war. But it is precisely this claim that has led to division in the church, since evangelical Christians often contend that broadening the definition of mission to encompass social transformation has devalued the importance of evangelism aimed at bringing people to Christ.” (Kinnamon, as above.)

Discuss the tension in the church between proclaiming the gospel and meeting people's physical needs. Consider the above passage from James against Jesus' command to make disciples (Mt 28:19).

Would it be okay for different churches and denominations to focus on different parts of the church's mission, provided they did not think they were any better than others were?

7. **Read Rom 15:5-6.** God is glorious and is not made more glorious by the praises of the church. What does it mean for the church to glorify God with one voice?

Close in prayer

Ask someone in the group to pray **Psalm 84**.

Praise God for building a spiritual temple from so many and diverse people and thank him for graciously including each one present.

One in Christ

*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free,
there is no longer male and female;
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Gal 3:28*

4. Reconciled in Christ

Open the study with prayer.

Introduction

The church acknowledges that it is made up of sinful people saved by Jesus. Now we will look at how sinful behaviour in the church can disrupt unity using an example from church history.

One of the first church splits came about because of the persecution of the church under Emperor Diocletian between 303 and 313 A.D. In 313 Constantine became emperor, converted to Christianity, and ended the persecution of Christians. During the persecution, possessing a Bible was illegal, and rather than face punishment, many Christians handed their copies over to be burned and accepted the gods of Rome. After the persecution had ended, those who had lapsed were called traditores (“those who handed over” their books. The modern word “traitor” is related to this word).

Some churches in northern Africa excluded traditores from coming back into the church. Other churches allowed traditores back after they had repented and done penance for their sin. The matter came to a head in 311 A.D. when the new Bishop of Carthage was hurriedly ordained before the local bishops could get to Carthage and someone suspected of being a traditor did the ordination. Many North African bishops were enraged and they ordained a rival bishop resulting in a split in the church (The churches that broke away were called Donatists, named after Donatus, their second Bishop of Carthage).

Behind the controversy was the teaching of the much-esteemed Bishop Cyprian of Carthage who had taught in 251 A.D. that unity with the church could not be broken. To stray outside of the church would mean to forfeit one's salvation. Therefore, a lapsed minister could not again become a minister in the church or administer sacraments. Cyprian did not think of the possibility of a minister lapsing under persecution. In that case, it was not clear if the minister had fallen away from the church forever, or if he could repent and return. Refer back to this example as you answer the questions.

Questions

1. Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-13. These verses and those that follow are sometimes used to justify separating from other churches. Why did Paul say to drive out the sexually immoral person (see vs 4 & 5 and vs. 6 & 7)?

Is Paul saying to drive out from the church all who behave sinfully (vs. 13)? What does he mean?

2. Read 2 Thessalonians 3:6 & 14-15. What do you think about Paul's command to warn and keep away from believers who are not living consistently with the Christian faith?

3. Read Titus 3:9-11. Does “have nothing to do with anyone who causes divisions,” mean that church unity is very important to Paul? What about fellowship with the divisive person?

4. Read Matthew 13:24-30 & 36-43. What do the various elements of the parable of the wheat and the tares represent?

the sower _____ the weeds _____
the field _____ the harvest _____
the seed _____ the reapers _____
the enemy _____

5. When, in the parable, is the separation of good and evil carried out?

6. Could this parable be used of the church?

7. Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo in north Africa in 388 A.D. referred to the parable of the wheat and the tares when he tried to heal the church split. He said that the church would always be a mixed body of saints and sinners, and that the validity of the church's ministry did not depend on the holiness of the ministers, but on the one they represented, Jesus Christ. Discuss.

8. We will consider doctrinal differences between churches in the next study, but how would you feel about worshipping in a church that accepted people who had sinned by denying the Lord, when you had suffered because you remained faithful?

9. Would you require any proof or evidence of repentance by sinners before they came back into your church? What do you think should be required of them?

10. The division in the churches of north Africa continued until the Arab invasions of the 7th and 8th centuries, which overcame both churches. They never reconciled.

Read 2 Cor 5:17-20. If Christians are reconciled to God in Christ, are we not also reconciled to each other in Christ?

Close in prayer

Ask someone to pray **Psalm 67**.

Pray for a forgiving heart towards others, the wisdom to know when to correct sin in others, and the grace in so doing. Pray for patience with one another's shortcomings and humility in all our relationships.

One in Christ

*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free,
there is no longer male and female;
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Gal 3:28*

5. No Compromise!

Start the study with prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to be your teacher.

Introduction

Christians are rightly concerned that support for church unity does not lead to compromise of essential doctrinal beliefs. The Bible warns Christians to be wary of false teachers. However, what attitude are we to take when respected Christian leaders disagree on doctrinal teaching? How much latitude for differences of opinions can we allow before compromising the truth? The ecumenical movement seeks truth and not compromise. Christians cannot simply agree to disagree with one another because that would compromise both our unity and our commitment to truth. Let's look at what Scripture says about these things.

Questions

1. Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-13.

How were the Corinthians identifying themselves?

What could be some problems with this?

Is the identification with denominational names like this?

Can you think of some ways we can identify ourselves that emphasise our common beliefs rather than our differences?

2. Would we be compromising truth for the sake of unity if we participated in a combined church event?

3. Read Romans 14:1-6 & 10.

How do you determine what are disputable matters?

What are some current examples of disputable matters?

Do you sometimes pass judgement on other Christians?

What does the Apostle Paul say about this (vs. 6)?

4. In many passages, the apostles warn the church about false teachers. List what each of the following passages says they were doing and then look for things in common. What were the characteristics of these false teachers? (It might be quicker to allocate one or two passages to each group member.)

Romans 16:17-18 _____ **Galatians 1:6-9** _____

1 Timothy 1:3-7 _____ **1 Timothy 4:1-7** _____

2 Timothy 4:3-4 _____ **Titus 1:10-11** _____

2 Peter 2:1-3 _____ **1 John 4:1-3** _____

5. Read **2 Cor 6:14-18**. Paul is writing about people who were attending pagan temples (vs. 16) but some use it against people who attend other churches. Have you ever thought of people attending some other denominations as unbelievers to be avoided? Do you think this is reasonable?

6. Our sin and human limitations make it difficult to agree on everything. What do the following verses say about this, and what our attitude should be?

1 Cor 3:3-9 _____ **1 Cor 11:17-19** _____

Jude 1:19 _____ **2 Cor 13:11** _____

Close in prayer

Ask someone to open the prayer time by praying **Psalm 16**.

Pray for a humble heart, for the willingness to listen to others who hold different opinions, and for openness to the teaching of the Holy Spirit. Pray for the Holy Spirit to arouse in us the desire for truth so that we will not accept discord in the church, but actively seek harmony.

One in Christ

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for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Gal 3:28*

6. One in Spirit

Open the study with prayer asking for the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Introduction

We started this series of studies looking at what Jesus thought about the unity of his followers. In this final study, we look at the Holy Spirit's involvement in church unity.

Unity in the Spirit, like unity in Christ, is an accomplished fact for Christians. Unfortunately, we don't see this unity displayed enough in the way Christians and churches behave towards each other. Just as sin raises a barrier between humanity and God, it also separates people from one another. The Bible describes the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Peace. Jesus calls us to be peacemakers and his Spirit entrusts this ministry of reconciliation to Christians.

Questions

1. Read Acts 2:1-4 and 4:32-33. The first miracle that occurred after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was to enable people who spoke different languages to hear the gospel in their own language. The first Spirit filled believers were of one heart, even sharing their possessions. Discuss what you think the Holy Spirit might want to do in today's church.

2. Read Ephesians 4:3. The apostle Paul urged the Ephesians (and us) to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We are tempted to think of peace in a negative way, as the absence of conflict. However, peace is a characteristic of God's Kingdom. The lack of peace characterises the kingdom of darkness. Peace is a strength, not a weakness. Can you think of an example where peace and unity in or between churches has been a witness for God's kingdom in the world?

What priority should the church give to maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace compared to other ministries (e.g. teaching, evangelism, youth work, healing the sick, feeding the poor, etc.)?

3. Read 2 Corinthians 5:17-20. God calls you to the ministry of reconciliation (vs 18). Have you thought of reconciliation as a ministry before?

Being reconciled to God implies reconciliation between people. **Read Matthew 5:9 & 23-24.** Share an example of where reconciliation ministered God's peace.

4. Read Romans 14:4. Would considering other Christians as someone else's servants be useful in peacemaking? How?

5. Read 1 Peter 3:8-9. Do you think unity of spirit (harmony), sympathy, love, a tender heart, and humility relate to unity in the church?

It helps to be prepared for verse 9. If another Christian criticises your church's practices or doctrinal beliefs, how might you respond in kindness?

6. Read Colossians 3:13-14. Being a peacemaker starts in the church. What can you do to be a peacemaker?

7. Read Philippians 2:1-5. Perfect church unity may not be achievable in a sinful world and church unity is not about institutional unity. What reasons does this passage give to encourage us to strive for unity in Christ and in the Spirit?

8. Read Galatians 3:28. This passage refers to the unity enjoyed by Jews and Gentiles, slaves and their owners, and men and women because they are all one in Christ. Should we also apply this reasoning to how we regard Christians from other churches?

9. Share something with the group that God has shown you about church unity while doing these studies.

Close in prayer

Open the prayer time with **Psalm 126**.

Ask God's forgiveness for the times we have broken fellowship with our fellow Christians, and for failing to strive to maintain the unity of the faith and the bond of peace. Ask the Holy Spirit to help us to be peacemakers, humble, gentle, patient and forbearing with those we disagree, and showing love for others so that we will display the unity of Christ's church here on earth.

Close with **Psalm 134**.

Unity in Diversity

Raymond Keith Williamson

Even now you are still not ready,... For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, "I belong to Paul", and another, "I belong to Apollos", are you not merely human?

1 Corinthians 3: 2-4

Obviously, Paul was not very impressed by the behaviour within the young Christian community in Corinth. Jealousy, quarrels, divisions! No, he was not impressed! And that is even clearer when one realises that what he wrote here in chapter 3 is a repeat of what he said perhaps even more strongly just back in chapter 1.

It has been reported to me...that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul", or "I belong to Apollos", or "I belong to Cephas", or "I belong to Christ". Has Christ been divided?

1 Corinthians 1: 11-13

Clearly he was not pleased with what was happening in Corinth, and he wanted to sort that lot out:

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no division among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

1 Corinthians 1: 10

It was a powerful appeal to them in the face of the squabbling that was going on within that small community. If we are prepared to hear it – clearly and distinctly – it will be an even more powerful appeal to us at this time in this place.

But why is that so? On one hand, we might easily dismiss that appeal as being completely unrealistic for us. Just think for a moment about the fact that "the whole church" of Corinth probably could meet in a house – and that would tell us something about the typical size of many of the Pauline congregations. Even a large house (and we would not be talking about senatorial mansions) would have been pressed to accommodate more than about forty. Given the dynamic character of the Corinthian church and its obvious tendency to factionalism, it might just offer us an excuse: if an assembly of no more than forty people can be so divided, and so quickly, what chance is there for us? We may think it gives us an 'out', and we can remain relaxed and comfortable with our divisions – while being friendly to each other, of course!

The passage from 1 Corinthians has frequently been understood to mean that there were four parties in Corinth – a Paul party, an Apollos party, a Peter party and a Christ party – the first three expressing loyalty to a significant figure in the early mission of Christianity, and the Christ party presumably decrying such factionalism but in a rather supercilious, perhaps exclusive, manner in such a way as to make themselves a fourth party. In contrast, some have said that when we read this passage in the context of all of Paul's letters to the Corinthians it seems there were only two main factions – a pro-Paul party and a faction opposed to Paul. No doubt it was a rather complicated situation, but the relevant point is that there was significant diversity within that one congregation: indeed, there was a division (maybe divisions) within that community, but they were all recognised as belonging to the community. At the time Paul was writing, we are only half way through the first century of the Christian era, and already there is such diversity that there is factionalism, even division, but we find that Paul did not denounce any of them as non-Christian, sham believers. He rebuked them for their pride and lack of love, but he nonetheless recognised them to be members of the body of Christ – thus, forming one community and being in communion with one another.

When we look across the rest of the New Testament, we find that the church communities in other places – Philippi, Colossae, Rome, those addressed in the Pastoral letters – represent quite a diversity. The churches addressed in the opening chapters of Revelation were clearly a mixed bag indeed! Here are Christian communities at different times in the first century and probably into the second century as well, which contained a considerable degree of diversity in faith and conduct that was not yet counted as unacceptable. It is an indisputable fact, for example, that the earliest Church knew several quite distinct types of church order, but that did not seem to be sufficient reason for the fracturing of the unity they had in Christ.

Indeed, there would seem to be no doubt that there were many different expressions of Christianity within the New Testament: we really have to recognise a marked degree of diversity within first-century Christianity. The unifying factor is the focus again and again on Christ.

Because of its multiplicity, fragmentary nature and complexity, the New Testament does not offer a single uniform system. The various writings of the New Testament are stamped by the extremely different situations for proclamation in which the various authors and the communities stand. Paul and John, for example, were open to new and different ways of looking at the centre of the Christian faith and bringing that centre into interaction with various other circles of faith and thought. But for all their openness to new developments, the New Testament writers mostly caught up in the broadening out of Christianity were conscious that a line had to be drawn at some point - that there could and should be a wide ranging diversity round the centre, but that a circumference had to be sketched in at certain points. Christian liberty is not limitless: it is always to be constrained by love of others in its conduct and by belief in Christ in its faith.

From these considerations (for which I am largely indebted to James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, SCM Press, London, 1977) two points can be made in summary:

First, that from the New Testament we can say there is a marked degree of diversity within first-century Christianity, yet we regard the New Testament as the foundation document, the primordial record, of our faith tradition. We speak of the Canon of the New Testament: it contains the Christian writings that have been duly recognised by the Church as scripture. Does this not mean that diversity has been canonised? What are the implications of this for the ecumenical endeavour?

Second, for the New Testament writers not only the unity but also the diversity of Christianity was determined by reference to Christ – the centrality and primacy of the exalted Lord, and the identity of the crucified Jesus with the exalted Son of God. For those writers, this is the decisive centre of Christian faith, and the source of unity.

So, the real challenge for us particularly from the Corinthian – indeed, the whole NT – situation would seem to be this: must we not draw the conclusion that there can be real communion in faith and in sacrament even when there are differences between us in our diverse traditions?

Remember our theme passage:

No one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

It is Paul's reminder to the Corinthians of the foundation of their faith community: Christ is their one foundation, and in him they are bound together.

Theological Foundations for Ecumenism

Within six months of commencing with NSWEC I attended my first General Meeting of the Australian Council of Churches (ACC), at which the 40th anniversary of an ecumenical body in Australia was celebrated. It was a privilege to be present for that occasion with so many past and present Australian leaders of the ecumenical movement and to experience the many splendid things about that meeting. The worship was an expression of the different traditions represented in ACC, and was an enriching and uniting experience. The diverse reports and issues reflected that twofold nature of ecumenism that the Church is to be both an authentic sign and an effective instrument of God's Spirit working for unity, peace and justice. The report of the Faith and Order (F&O) Commission with its focus on Australian churches' response to Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM), the support for a 'Mission and Evangelism' programme, the Commission for World Christian Action (CWCA) report, and the presentation by the Commission on the Status of Women, especially the audio-visual on domestic violence, were significant examples of ACC being an agent for ecumenism in its broadest sense.

It helped me to see the breadth of the ecumenical vision as a vision that challenges us to work together for the unity and renewal of the church and for the unity and renewal of the whole human community. It has been expressed in countless places in many different ways, such as in a World Council of Churches (WCC) F&O Paper:

[t]he divisions among the churches and the failure of their members to live in true koinonia ... affect and hinder the mission of the Church. Mission has as its ultimate goal the koinonia of all. The mission belongs to the essence of the nature and being of the Church as koinonia. This makes the restoration of unity between Christians and the renewal of their lives an urgent task.

[The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement, F&O Paper 181(1998); also The Nature and Mission of the Church, F&O Paper 198 (2005).]

Understood in this way, ecumenism confronts whatever works against unity and wholeness in every situation. It is fundamentally an attitude towards everything we do; it is a way of doing; it is a way of being Christian people engaged in the ministry of Christ. So it confronts us at the points of division within and between the churches: the existence of those divisions ensures that the Church fails to be an authentic sign of God's purposes of unity and wholeness. It confronts us, also, at the points of division in our world, and it calls the Church to be an effective instrument of God's Spirit in seeking wholeness – peace through justice – in God's world. The ecumenical movement is about nothing less than the renewal of the church in its mission, God's mission, to bring everything, in all the richness of the diversity of God's creation, "together in Christ".

One ecumenical theologian, Ernst Lange, said, "today there is only one way for the church to be the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, and that is the ecumenical way" [Ernst Lange (1927-1974), *And Yet It Moves*].

That sounds good, but the question is: what is the ecumenical way? And what are its biblical and theological foundations and what exactly is the ecumenical vision and what drives it? And how does ecumenism fit into broader questions of theology? That is what we are to think about in this session.

So, let's think about ecumenism and what it is. Ecumenism as we generally understand it, refers to the visible unity of the church. The word ecumenism/ ecumenical comes from the Greek word

oikoumene = the whole inhabited world, which itself comes from oikos = house, household. It is an inclusive word for human community. For that reason the meaning of 'ecumenism' can be taken to reflect that universal vision and we can broaden the ecumenical agenda to include inter-religious dialogue. Certainly in our multi-faith and multi-cultural societies there is great need for interfaith understanding and respect – but there are different questions involved in interfaith dialogue and a different methodology which is not dealt with here.

The usual way we understand ecumenism is about Christian unity and the modern ecumenical movement generally refers to the movement that began 100 years ago in 1910 in Edinburgh with the World Missionary Conference. We will be looking at the history of that modern movement in the next couple of sessions. Ecumenism as we use the term today refers to a movement of churches and Christians with the goal of the visible unity of the churches, and it touches all dimensions of church life including common worship, mission, service and renewal. One definition of ecumenism puts it like this: ecumenism is 'anything that relates to the whole task of the whole church to bring the gospel to the whole world'. Another way people define ecumenism is to think of it as the churches' 'search for unity in the truth found in Christ', with the idea that the closer the churches come to Christ, the closer they come to each other - and putting that the other way around, is the idea that unity is a way of coming closer to revealed truth – to Christ and that is way of renewal for all our churches. The closer we come to Christ, the closer we come to each other. And the closer we come to each other is a way of coming closer to Christ. Ecumenism offers a way of renewal.

That definition that links unity with truth raises one of the key questions in ecumenical dialogue: are there limits to unity. Put differently: are there limits to acceptable diversity?

Limits to acceptable unity - are there limits to unity? Is there a unity that is not acceptable? Is there a diversity that is so broad that error is embraced? Are there untruths that cause legitimate division? And if there are, what are they?

In the very early church, divisions happened over different understandings of the nature of Christ - the Docetists who thought Jesus was not really human but only appeared to be; the Monophysites and the Duophysites who argued about whether Jesus had one or two natures; and there were the Arians, and then the great split over the use of icons; then the Reformation - so many times when Christians felt others were in such significant error they could no longer stay together. In the NT, the First Letter of John deals with just such a situation - an unacceptable Christology and unacceptable morality - and it endorses separation. Visible unity was seen to be not an end in itself. It must be unity with Christ, in Christ, in the truth.

That is easy to say, of course; working out what that means is the tricky bit. Much of the recent ecumenical work has tried to overcome old divisions in the church by seeking greater convergence in understanding in regard to the issues that caused those divisions. But more recently new divisions have been emerging: just think of trying to hold the Anglican Communion together during the last few years! Or we only have to think back a few decades to see how some churches adopted different stands over apartheid in South Africa. Some suggest that it is the failure to love that is the great untruth that cannot be tolerated.

The point to make out of this is that ecumenism has to do with visible unity, but not unity for its own sake. What we seek is unity in Christ and in the truth of Christ.

That is the goal; that is the ideal. But practically what would it look like? In talking about and striving for the visible unity of the Church, there have been different ideas about what exactly that means.

As we will see in the next sessions, there was a time in the 20th C when great unions took place, bringing about a unity at the level of ecclesial structures - like you see in the church of north and south India, or the Uniting Church in Australia, where Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational

churches came together in unity. And many expected that such unions would keep on happening and would become more inclusive – and this would be the path to the visible unity of the Church.

But that did not happen, and so people began to think of visible unity as the churches recognising in each other the marks of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church of Christ. This has its basis in the NT. There ἐκκλησία = meeting/church refers to both the local congregation and to the church universal, with the sense that each congregation is the expression, in that place and time, of the one church of Jesus Christ. Can we apply that NT concept to the ecumenical goal of the visible unity of the church? To do so means that unity consists in us recognising in each other, in our various churches, the one holy, catholic and apostolic church. That is the idea put forward in the statement from WCC Canberra Assembly in 1991, and repeated in Porto Alegre in 2006 - that visible unity consists in us recognising in each other the one holy, catholic and apostolic church and so sharing a common sacramental life, entered by one baptism, celebrating one Eucharist, sharing a common life, recognising one another's ministries, and engaging in common witness and service. And all held together by conciliar forms of co-operation.

But there is an important note here – an important ecumenical principle - about visible unity. The unity the churches seek has never been thought of as uniformity, with us all worshipping the same way and expressing our faith the same way. The ecumenical principle is unity in diversity, reflecting God's complex unity as Trinity and the wondrous complexity of God's creation. And it is one of the significant features of the latest statement from the Porto Alegre Assembly that it states, the church's unity in diversity “is an image of the triune God”, and it goes on to speak of diversity as essential for wholeness. Christian unity to be catholic must be able to include human diversity in all its racial, cultural, theological and liturgical richness. Jürgen Moltmann made the comment that the great threat to the unity and catholicity of the church is not diversity but uniformity.

And the images of the church in the NT are most images of a complex unity - unity in diversity:

- body (1 Cor 12: 12-28)
- building (1Pet 2:4f)
- vine (John 15)
- flock (John 10)

What theologians recognise is that the Scriptures which are the source of our unity are also the source of our diversity. The NT canonises our differences, our different ecclesiologies. The Vatican II, in the Decree on Ecumenism, says “While preserving unity in essentials, let everyone in the church preserve a proper freedom in the various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in the variety of liturgical rites and even in the theological elaborations of revealed truth. In all things let charity prevail.” Preserving unity in essentials, let everyone in the church preserve a proper freedom. Unity in diversity - and from the Porto Alegre Assembly - diversity is essential to wholeness.

Unity in essentials - the problem of course is in working out and agreeing on what constitutes the essentials, what are the limits to acceptable diversity? Churches cannot agree on what constitutes the essentials. Maybe language about a hierarchy of truths can help with the idea that some doctrines are more central, some less central when it comes to disclosing God in Jesus Christ – a hierarchy of truths that maybe puts the doctrine of the Trinity and the baptism of babies on different levels of importance. But infant baptism is a communion-dividing issue for some. So too is the exercise of episcopacy in the person of a bishop.

One limit to acceptable diversity in our current situation that may lead to new divisions is over the nature of human sexuality. Certainly that is true in the Anglican Church and behind it are different understandings about the authority of Scripture and about biblical hermeneutics.

So the ecumenical quest goes on!

But unity with diversity is the ecumenical principle.

Ecumenists speak about the unity of the church having two aspects. Unity is both a goal for the church and a gift of God already given. And so the language about visible unity reflects these two truths – the churches already have unity because of God's action in Christ, but the ecumenical task is allowing that unity to become visible, removing the barriers we place in the way.

The basic conviction about unity as both gift and goal comes from Scripture.

For example, **Ephesians 4:1-16**.

What do you hear?

- unity of the Spirit - a common life that all believers share
- work zealously to maintain - through humility, gentleness, forbearance, love and peace i.e. relational life
- vs 4-6, pre-existing liturgical piece - 7 statements of unity, '1'
- priority to truth - grow into Christ
- centrality of Christ v.15 - Christ undivided, closer to him, closer to each other
- vigorous effort to maintain what already given but easy to lose.
- links unity and mission

This verse and the surrounding verses form a passage that is key to the ecumenical vision. It is a passage in the Letter to the Ephesians that declares that the ultimate purpose of our life, of human history, of the universe, is the bringing of all things together in Christ. But within the passage, this particular verse demands some attention: *we must grow up in every way into Christ*. This common and familiar translation, takes the verb in the intransitive sense, meaning 'to grow' or 'to increase'. But the verb in the Greek text is precisely the same in both its intransitive and transitive form, and so the phrase can have two equally valid meanings. If the verb is taken in the transitive sense, meaning 'to cause to grow', the translation of the phrase would be, *we must cause all things to grow up into Christ*. Both meanings are correct. We might speculate that it is as though the writer wanted to hold the two meanings together in one word. Those two meanings hold two inseparable truths about the nature of the Christian calling. First, it has implications about the quality of our own lives, both individually as people of faith and corporately as the community of faith: *we are to grow up in every way into Christ*. Secondly, it has implications for the mission to which we are called both individually as people of faith and corporately as the community of faith: *we are to cause all things to grow up into Christ*. Of course, the two cannot be separated; they belong together as two sides of the one coin. Our vocation is to be both a sign and an instrument of God's reconciliation, and to be an effective instrument requires being an authentic sign through the quality of our life. That is why we can never be satisfied with disunity between the churches: we cannot authentically witness to the Gospel of reconciliation while we remain separated from one another.

Look at another passage - **John 17: 11, 20-23**.

What do you hear?

- unity of the church is grounded in the life of the Trinity - 'I in them and you in me, may they also be in us', our unity is to reflect that between Father and Son. Rudolph Schackengurg, German theologian, said our unity is a 'sign and expression of the divine being' [The Gospel according to John, p. 192].

- Christian unity is the goal and fulfilment of Christ's mission - with a further purpose, his acknowledgement by the world

- passage links unity with mission - unity leads unbelieving world to faith in Jesus as the one sent by God - our love reflects God's love.

What gospel do we proclaim by our dividedness?

But unity is not just a pragmatic thing - it belongs to the nature of the church - and is a matter of Christian faith: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church" etc. It is God's gift.

In terms of unity as our goal, there are so many admonitions to unity in the NT that tell us unity was as elusive in the C1 as it is now. In 1 Cor – "I belong to Apollos, I to Paul, I to Cephas", I to the Anglicans, I to the Catholics, but giving our fundamental allegiance to what is a part rather than the whole is not something Paul will tolerate. Ephesians [ch2] is particularly directed towards maintaining unity, as are Acts 15 - the Council of Jerusalem, Galatians 2 and 5, Romans 4 and 11 over the question of the inclusion of Gentile Christian with Jewish Christians in the church.

Now I think all our traditions would agree that unity is a gift and goal of church but in the nature of ecumenical realities, what our traditions do with these passages differs. Some of our churches identify themselves with the one holy, catholic and apostolic church, and maybe, if we are being very honest, all our churches do secretly, in their institutional hearts. And we hope everyone will see the light and become like us. But for any church to identify itself exclusively as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, it necessarily excludes others. And traditionally churches have labelled others 'heretical', or given them a lesser status as say, ecclesial communities. Some churches recognise in other churches some of the marks of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church, but maybe not all, maybe not enough for full communion. My own Anglican Church for example would consider unity only on the basis of what is called the Lambeth Quadrilateral, the 4 essential marks of the church from our perspective: the Scriptures, the historic creeds, the Nicene and Apostles creeds, the two gospel sacraments of baptism and eucharist, and the historic episcopate. So we think of unity as a gift and goal for the church, but who do we include in the definition of church.

There are two other broader theological considerations I want to touch on as we think about the theology of ecumenism.

1. The first has to do with the nature of God and particularly God's transcendence, God's infinity and our finitude. It says two things - first God is beyond all our explanations and projects - second, all our human claims to truth are partial at best. And we need each other to come closer to fullness of understanding. Frequent in Scripture is the question, "to what will you liken me? I am God and there is no other", Is 46:5,9, Is 55:8 "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways." This is about the utter otherness of God. It says, all our language, our metaphors, our points of comparison are limited and partial before the reality of God. It ties in with the fact that all human thought is conditioned by culture so that by our very nature we are incapable of reaching absolute truth. The first two commandments convey this insight: "You shall have no other Gods but me", so God is and there is ultimate truth - but "you shall make no graven image", our grasp of the truth is never final and we must not settle for less. Seen this way, we can think of ecumenism as a rejection of idolatry - of graven image theology. It is the refusal to absolutise our relative perspectives. This should make us humble - and willing to listen to different voices in theological debate - women, the third world, different races.

2. The Second broad theological perspective is about where we start the discussion of ecumenism and I have hinted at that already. That what distinguishes us as Christians is our confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and our experience of God's grace through faith in him, and

with this as our bottom line, all our confessional differences pale into insignificance, well, less significance beside the unity we share in Christ. And this is where ecumenical dialogue must begin.

It is not enough just to accept diversity and allow it be, and have our churches settle in the good relationships we now enjoy but acquiesce in our dividedness. This is where I think we are coming to now by and large in the ecumenical journey. But it is a weak doctrine of the *koinonia* the gospel calls us to. And a weak understanding of the nature of the unity in truth we seek.

But the reality is that while there have been wonderful signs of the ecumenical journey continuing, overall ecumenism occupies a lesser place in the life of the churches (it “is no longer in the bones of church leaders”, as I once heard it said). There is no longer the same commitment to strive for the visible unity of the Body of Christ that gave rise to this movement throughout most of the twentieth century. It now seems true to say that to be ecumenical, to be guided by the vision of the *oikoumenē*, is to be counter to the prevailing mindset within much of the Church and in the wider society.

This reality has to be recognised. But the problem also must be named: it leaves us content with the status quo unchallenged and unchanged. Consequently, the visible disunity of the Church remains – we are not living the unity we have in Christ – and the divisions among the churches block wholehearted pursuit together of an ecumenical vision for humankind. Paradoxically, in this globalised world where the individual and the local has become the focus, the ‘big picture’ of ecumenism, of the *oikoumenē*, seems to be discarded.

For an alternative to be realised, the 1964 Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism recognised:

There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart. For it is from newness of attitudes (cf. Eph. 4:23), from self-denial and unstinted love, that yearnings for unity take their rise and grow toward maturity.

[“Catholic Principles on Ecumenism” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*), II, 7, in Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (Gen. Ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II* (London, Dublin, Melbourne: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), p. 351.]

It is only when there is such a ‘conversion’ within each person, and within our churches as institutions, that ecumenism will truly be possible. It is only when ecumenism, that calls us into more visible expressions of the unity that we have through our being incorporated into Christ, is seen as essential to our being Church, that it releases energy and frees us for mission.

Alongside our diversity, alongside our different perspectives of God's truth, we need dialogue, growth in insight, so that speaking the truth in love we may grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.

About the Authors

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How did a Pentecostal from the Illawarra and an Anglican from Sydney come to be joint authors of this work? Derek Thompson enrolled as a student in the Ecumenics Summer School of 2015 in Canberra, which was run by Raymond Williamson. Due to insufficient numbers, the course had to be cancelled. Derek had planned to take a draft of the *One in Christ* Bible Studies to the course to get some feedback. So, Derek emailed the studies to Ray for comment. Ray responded with comments and a couple of articles, and this eBook resulted.

Raymond K. Williamson

Ray Williamson is an ordained minister in the Anglican Church of Australia. He served as General Secretary of the NSW Ecumenical Council from 1986 to 2007. During that time he was also secretary to two national ecumenical commissions, co-founding the Centre for Ecumenical Studies in 2007. Ray was awarded an OAM in 2008 for services to ecumenism.

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