

# What Is Biblical Unity?

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## Introduction

One of the key elements often cited in church history as a foundation to a great work of God in revival is a God-centered unity and the core components involved in that unity. It is also the case that unity can become a buzzword in our subjective, relativistic culture to merely “get along” with little attention paid to what unites us. If these two things are true then it is imperative that we consider the Biblical data surrounding unity for the sake of God’s glory filling the earth, and our thinking and living conforming to His revealed Word.

It is the aim of this paper to introduce three key Biblical texts often cited in promoting unity. The first is from the Old Testament, the second from the words of Jesus, and the final one from the pen of the apostle Paul. In understanding the teaching of these passages we will then seek to identify obstacles to unity, the core components to unity, and some key unity principles to employ in the mission of Christ together in our community. This is not a thorough exegetical paper on these passages, nor does it detail all the implications for unity, but aims to provide a launching off point for discussion, reflection, and direction together as leaders of local churches and leaders of God’s church in the community.

## Key Biblical Passages

### *Psalm 133:1-3*

The Psalm is ascribed to David, which is significant since David saw his share of division and conflict both in his own family and in the nation. Significant as well is that it is one of the fifteen Psalms of Ascent (Psalm 120-134) included in the Hebrew Psalter for the pilgrimage of God’s people to Jerusalem, up Mt. Zion, and to the Temple of Yahweh. These psalms were to be sung as they made their physical journey up to the Temple expressing their spiritual journey to maturity with God. Without forcing too much upon the order of these Psalms, it has been suggested that there is a progression in their content from vision, to consecration, to enjoyment, to maturity. This appears to be a fair (although simple) outline as we see in Psalm 120 cries of distress to God for His deliverance leading to standing in the Temple, hands lifted high, worshipping the Lord in

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fullness and maturity in Psalm 134. If this is the case, then it is significant that we find Psalm 133 placed right at the end of these Psalms of Ascent where the various tribes of Israel have gathered together in one place for one purpose. David reflects on the maturity and enjoyment of the different tribes unified before God to worship Him and receive blessing from Him. The physical/fellowship unity he speaks of then, is a unity that flows from the same clear vision of God at the Temple. Therefore the very placement of this Psalm in the category of “Ascents” highlights the core content of the unity of God’s people (a clear vision of God). And where it is placed in the “Ascents” is an indicator of how God views the unity of God’s people (a sign of maturity).

Let’s deal briefly now with the details of the Psalm. There are two central images in this Psalm both expressing the picture of the blessing of unity. First is the imagery of the oil running down the head of Aaron, even on the collar of his robes found in v2. What are we to see here? Aaron was the first high priest and this anointing oil was not ordinary oil poured on just anyone. We must see the holy activity that love and unity between brothers demonstrates. Not only is it a picture of holy activity, but it is a picture of the lavish, overflowing blessing of God on His people. It may begin with the high priest, but it’s “poured out” (not sprinkled) in such abundant measure that it flows down his head onto his clothes. Even those not seeking blessing will receive it as an overflow of the affection and love of brothers dwelling together in unity around the worship of God.

The second picture employed here is found in v3, and the dew of Hermon that falls on the mountains of Zion. What are we to see in this image? Mount Hermon was one of the highest peaks in the land of Israel and is located in the northernmost boundary of the Promised Land. The moisture that would accumulate on this high mountain here is pictured as flowing down to fall on the lower peak of Mount Zion. Therefore, the image is similar to the oil flowing down the beard of Aaron. This unity, that is good and pleasant, is not merely about Aaron or Mt. Hermon, but about the abundant flow that falls down to the robes (the people the high priest served), and Zion (the people of God). The love and unity of the brothers coming together with a like vision of God, worshipping Him as one, is an abundant blessing to them and to those not even seeking it.

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*John 17:11, 20-23*

We move next to the familiar and often quoted text of Jesus in what has been commonly called the High Priestly Prayer. Here Jesus is praying to the Father about various subjects. Let's consider the context and flow of this passage according to the following outline. He begins by praying for Himself (17:1-5), followed by a general description of the people for whom He is praying (17:6-10), and an introduction to the central prayer that they may be one (17:11-12). He then goes on to specifically pray that they be unified against the attacks of Satan (17:13-16), that they may be sanctified and kept in the truth (17:17-19), and then into an expanded section on the nature of that unity He is praying for (17:20-23). He finishes the prayer expressing His ultimate desire to the Father for His people (17:24-26). For the sake of our stated goals here, let's focus on v11 and vs20-23 where the subject of unity is laid out.

The first thing we need to notice is *who* Jesus is praying for. These are a specific people. They are those whom the Father has given to Jesus, and He prays that they be kept in His name. These are people different than the "world" whom the Father has given to the Son as His inheritance (v9). They are separated from the world, yet still in the world. Later in v20, Jesus prays not only for those who have believed, but those who will believe in Him. Quite simply these are believers in Jesus whom the Father has rescued from the world. Jesus is praying for the unity of believers and future believers, not the unity of the world. Therefore, the prerequisite for unity is the saving work of God in the human heart. One final remark about the people for whom Jesus prays is that their unity is tied in to Jesus having sanctified Himself so that they may be sanctified. He is not praying for a specific race, nation, or denomination, but those who have received His Word, and have believed in Who He is. Today we would say that it is those who have received and believed in the core Gospel message.

Another key exegetical clue to what Jesus is praying for is found in v11 where Jesus prays that the Father will "*keep* them in your name ... that they may be one, even as we are one." Notice here that the Trinity did not work at becoming one; they have always been one. The point? Jesus never prays that believers would work at being unified, but that the essential unity that the Gospel produces would be kept, preserved, maintained. This unity

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is not created by men's efforts at fellowship or "getting along"; it is already there through faith in Christ. Jesus' prayer is that it would remain after His departure. The mystery of the essence of the Godhead, three in one, is likened to the same mystery of believers being made one through Christ from all peoples of the earth. This unity is not achieved through church membership but solely through the death of Christ. This is the invisible church made up of men and women who have never met, yet share an essential unity through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. This unity is not voluntary or optional, but part and parcel of the work of the Gospel. Believers in Jesus Christ have a unity with foreign believers whom they have never met more so than biological family members who are outside of Christ. Jesus' prayer is for the unity that believing in Christ creates to be kept in the midst of the world, the attacks of the evil one, and the obvious differences between people, cultures, and languages.

*Ephesians 4:1-16*

It's hard to jump into the middle of a book and carefully bring to a particular text all that the human writer has taught so as to correctly interpret each passage ... but let's give it a try. All of Ephesians chapter 1-3 is about the spiritual blessings of the Gospel through Christ. In chapter one, the apostle Paul is bubbling over with excitement for the glory of God in salvation. He chose us (1:4), He adopted us (1:5), He redeemed us (1:7), He lavished grace on us (1:8), He made known His will to us (1:9) ... *"to unite all things in Him"* ... (1:10), to the praise of His glory (1:14). In chapter two, Paul revels in the rescue of by the grace of God alone. We were dead in our sins (2:1), we followed the course of this world (2:2), we lived according to the passions of our flesh (2:3), and were children of wrath (2:3), *but God* made us alive together with Christ (2:5), not as a result of works (2:9), to do good works (2:10), and ... *"has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility"* ... (2:14), to be built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (2:22). In chapter three, Paul speaks of the Gospel made known to all people. The mystery has been made known (3:3), revealed to the apostles and prophets (3:5), that Gentiles are members of the same body (3:6), ... *"to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages"* ... (3:9), so that God's glory is manifest in the church and in Christ for all generations (3:21).

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*Therefore* (4:1), walk in a manner worthy of this Gospel ... *“eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”* (4:3). It becomes clear that Paul has woven this theme of unity through the first three chapters of Ephesians climaxing in his call to live out the Gospel. And like Jesus’ prayer in John 17, we see that Paul is not commanding that his listeners “create” unity, or “work at” unity, but that they maintain the unity that the Gospel has already created. Such care is to be given to not let anything disrupt or destroy that unity by lives lived with humility, gentleness, patience, and love (3:2).

He then proceeds to teach this essential unity that the Gospel has established. In verses 4-6 he uses the word “one” seven times, obviously drawing our attention to the subject of the nature of this unity.

(1) One Body (4:4) – This is one of Paul’s favorite metaphors for unity. In 1 Corinthians 12, he elaborates on the body metaphor in much greater detail. The point is that this oneness is not loose or external, but organic and essential. We don’t pick the parts of our body. God created the body and made it whole. For all the various parts, functions, and variety, it is one, bound together in essential unity.

(2) One Spirit (4:4) – The regenerating work of the Spirit is what has created this oneness. Paul emphasizes the calling of believers in this text, and no doubt it is the Spirit work in calling men from death to life. The Spirit enlightens, quickens, and enables faith, bringing men into the one body through the one calling. We don’t establish unity, the Spirit already has.

(3) One Hope (4:4) – This is the one hope that belongs to your call. What is that one hope? It is the hope of glory, the new outlook that the Spirit creates in the hearts of believers. This is the one blessed hope all believers share. Our oneness has the same focus – the glory of God in the return of Christ.

(4) One Lord (4:5) – There is only one name under heaven by which men can be saved, the person of Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). Essential to unity is this one Lord and Him alone. For unity to be eagerly maintained, nothing and no one can be on par with the person and work of Jesus.

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(5) One Faith (4:5) – Some have suggested this ‘one faith’ means affirming a confession of faith or creedal document, and while these can certainly be helpful, that can’t be what Paul means here. It seems more natural to understand Paul to be speaking of saving or justifying faith. And here he is teaching that entrance into this Gospel unity is through faith in the work of Jesus on the cross alone. No man is justified by the works of the law, by church attendance, or by great acts of kindness. For unity to be more than superficial, skin-deep, fellowship it must be contended for at the level of faith in Christ alone.

(6) One Baptism (4:5) – Because of all the aforementioned explanations, it seems unlikely that Paul can be teaching here some sort of physical baptism that gains one entrance into the body. Rather, consistent to his teaching, this baptism Paul speaks of has to do with the believers baptism into Christ. Elsewhere Paul speaks of this as one’s “union with Christ”, again emphasizing that this unity is not about an external act, but a supernatural work of the Spirit whereby believers are made to be “in Christ.”

(7) One God and Father of all (4:6) – Jesus came to earth to explain the Father (John 1:18). The Son took on human flesh and dwelt among mankind to do the will of the Father. Through the obedient life, and sacrificial death of the Son, the Father is glorified and a group of people are redeemed and made One in Christ. All believers are children of God, sons and daughter of the heavenly Father, adopted into one family.

These are the things that establish unity. To seek to “be unified” around anything else is backwards. The foundation of our unity is the precious doctrine of the Gospel. One Father, who sent His Son to be our One Lord, so that through One Spirit, we might receive One baptism, by One faith, into our One hope, and made members of One body! We don’t minimize the Biblical teaching of the Gospel for the sake of unity ... we clearly teach the Gospel and so preserve the unity that God has created.

Much more could be said about this teaching of unity in Ephesians 4, but consider in summary the remaining verses of our section (4:7ff). Here Paul answers the following question: How is this unity preserved? His first answer is by giving gifts to the body. There is a beautiful diversity in this essential unity. By God’s grace, gifts are given to each

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member to use for the building up of the body (4:7-10). He gave church leaders for the equipping of the saints, to teach and train, bringing the body to maturity (4:11-13), *“until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”* (4:13). His second answer to the question of how this unity is preserved is - Hold fast to the teaching of the Gospel (4:14-16). Don't be tossed around by false teaching, the crafty schemes of man, the ideas of the world in growing a church, the strategy of business for training leaders, or anything of that kind. Paul says you preserve this unity by speaking the truth in love so that every individual grows in the Gospel and the Body is equipped. The result? Every member “works properly” and the “body grows”. Again, Paul's point is that unless you know the truth, speak the truth, and equip others in the truth, the unity of the Church will not be maintained, the members will not mature, and the Body will not function properly and grow.

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## Obvious Obstacles to Unity

Before we seek to summarize these central Biblical teachings and develop some unity principles to live by it may help to point out a few of the obvious obstacles to unity that we face. Many well-intentioned people have sought unity on grounds other than what the Bible teaches and we would do well to evaluate our motives, foundations, and efforts by observing some of these misapplied principles. This is not exhaustive, but represents major categories of extremes. We are so prone to over-reaction and often run to one extreme after observing the other extreme. Consider the following:

### *Underemphasize the Essential Gospel Core Doctrine*

Doctrine divides, right? We should just leave it at the door, and do our best to get along and appreciate (which often means ignore) each other's differences. This will never create Biblical unity! This argument goes something like this: “Let's have discussions and fellowship so that we can come to common ground on what we agree on.” The problem here is that we are assuming the beginning place (Biblical fellowship and partnership) when in fact that is the result of adherence to the Gospel Core Doctrine. As a result we end up with neither true spiritual fellowship, nor a God-centered Gospel.

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### *Overemphasize the Non-Essential Doctrinal Issues*

I want to be careful and clear about this obstacle. It appears to me that when the Gospel Core is not clearly defined and taught that secondary issues end up taking a more prominent place in the discussion that they should. To underemphasize the essential doctrine of the Gospel and the lack of clarity that blows in the wind, some can tend to overemphasize the non-essential doctrinal issues. This creates a sectarian, separatist spirit that results likewise in neither real partnership nor a clear Gospel Core.

### *Elevating People Over the Text*

This is as old an obstacle as “I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, I follow Cephas” (1 Corinthians 1:12). God has gifted some with great leadership abilities and when people are more enamored with the abilities of men than the revelation of God there surfaces a real problem. If a unity movement is driven by men and not driven by the Word, there will never be loving relationship together for the mission, nor a courageous commitment to the Scriptures.

### *Using the Bible to Beat People Up*

The other side of the previous obstacle is using the sword of the Spirit to cut people up with rather than allowing the Spirit to pierce one’s own heart. God has revealed Himself and we come to understand who He is and what He has done for us through the pages of the Scriptures. We must give ourselves to learn the Word and handle it with skill and excellence (2 Timothy 2:15), and as the Word transforms our hearts it should create a deep humility and love for others that minimizes human pride that so often manifests itself in argumentative words and anger.

## **Core Components to Unity**

Following our Biblical exposition and the warnings of unbiblical approaches to unity, let’s consider some summary statements about what constitutes Biblical unity.

### *1. Unity is a work of God through the regenerating work of the Spirit*

Unity is established one way and one way alone – through the saving work of regeneration by the Spirit of God. God creates unity in the creation of a redeemed people set apart

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for His glory. Ephesians 4 makes this point abundantly clear through the 7-fold use of “one” with each reference pointing to the work of God and not man.

*2. The Bible never calls us to create unity, only to maintain unity*

Biblical unity is likened to the unity of the Godhead. It is organic in essence and inseparable in nature. Jesus’ prayer in John 17 asks the Father to keep those who have believed and will believe unified against the world and the devil. The oneness of all true believers is as mysterious and solid as the Trinity itself.

*3. God honoring unity is about God, not man*

The good and pleasant unity of Psalm 133 was the blessing of one people looking unto the One God together. It was as they came together as different tribes to worship the God of all tribes that blessing poured out to the people from every tribe. The key figure in Biblical unity is never men, but God.

*4. Unity blesses people, builds up the body, and grows deeper Christians*

The image of the body of Christ found in Ephesians 4, 1 Corinthians 12, and Romans 12 makes clear the interworking of the individual Christian as a member of the One body. When the individual member walks in a manner worthy of his Gospel calling, the Body grows, and as the Body grows the individual members are built up as well ... and all are blessed.

*5. Unity will always be about the Worship of God for His work of salvation*

Biblical unity can’t be based on anything other than the work of God in salvation. The people worshiped God at the Temple in Psalm 133. Jesus prayed for those whom the Father had already given Him in John 17. Paul described the oneness of believers as accomplished through the work of God in Ephesians 4. God redeeming men started unity, and those redeemed men worshipping God for His salvation preserves unity.

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*6. All believers are a part of One invisible Church*

The language of the New Testament focuses on the One invisible Church made up of true believers saved by grace. This one body has nothing to do with geography, race, or institution. The dividing wall between Jew and Gentile has been removed by the Gospel (Ephesians 2) making all into one body. The local church is a visible expression in geographic locations, in various people groups, and different structures of the One invisible Church.

*7. Unity is a sign of maturity and leads to greater maturity*

Tied into Jesus prayer of John 17 for the Father to keep them in His name is His prayer that they may be sanctified in the truth. Paul likewise expresses in Ephesians 4 one of the results of unity as attaining to mature manhood so the body builds itself up in love.

*8. When anything or anyone is elevated to the level of Jesus, unity is destroyed*

The “One Lord” of Ephesians 4:5 teaches us the uniqueness and distinctiveness of Jesus above all for salvation and the unity of the body. There can be no co-redeemer, works of the law, or any other name that brings salvation.

*9. Fellowship doesn't lead to doctrinal unity, rather unity about the Gospel Core leads to true fellowship*

To have Biblical unity there must be belief in the complete fall of man in sin and his need for salvation outside himself; the unique person of Jesus Christ and His substitutionary work of redemption on the cross; and entrance into that salvation through faith alone as accomplished by God through the work of the Spirit. This is the Gospel Core that unites men and women into the same body and creates loving, intimate fellowship for the sake of the mission of the Kingdom of God.

*10. Unity on the Gospel Core provides a platform to not just agree to disagree on the non-essentials, but learn from one another in areas various Biblical interpretations*

When there is joyful belief in the essential work of Christ as the core of the Bible story, then (and only then) can there be humble and helpful dialogue about the many issues of

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interpretation in Bible doctrine, church practices, and Christian living.

## Unity Principles

*1. Unity is not the end goal, the glory of God in the salvation of sinners is.*

I propose that we never herald a movement of unity as the end for which we work. While preserving unity is an essential teaching in the Scriptures, this is near-sighted and can be very man-centered. As we work hard at keeping the unity God has created between us, we should hold as our highest aim to see God get glory as more and more people are adopted into the family and made members of the body of Christ.

*2. We must be more committed to the truth of the Gospel than the visible institutional church.*

I propose that we turn first to the Word of God for our answers in mission and partnership, not church policies or institutional structures. As we study the truth, live out the truth, and point people to the truth, the local church will be built up ... and grow in healthy ways.

*3. The goal should not be “more unity” with “more people” but “deeper unity” with the “one people”.*

I propose that we guard against a bigger and better mentality. While it is exciting to see more and more individuals and churches “come on board” that should not be our goal. Our goal should be connecting with those individuals and churches who love the Gospel Core and with whom we already have essential unity.

*4. Keeping the unity of the Body is a work we must give ourselves to. We cannot isolate ourselves from one another nor exalt ourselves if we want Jesus to be made famous, and revival to be poured out.*

I propose that the price to pay for keeping the unity of the Gospel is personal humility and hard work. It always takes work to stay connected to each other and grow in listening to one another, but this work is always worth it. Let humility characterize our growing individual relationships, our church partnerships, and our mission to the community, as these are signs of Biblical maturity.

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