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A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ref-rev-01.php



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THE CHURCH'S UNITY

Joel R. Beeke

The Nicene Creed confesses "one church" (*unam ecclesiam*), meaning the church is built upon one rock, one Messiah, one confession. The *Westminster Confession* adds that the church's unity lies in Jesus Christ: "The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all" (Chapter 25.1). That the church is Christ's body, and He the head (Col. 1:18), implies that Christ and the church are complementary, for a body and a head cannot exist without each other.

Wilhelmus à Brakel stressed this by saying the church and Christ are each other's property. Their union is affirmed by the gift of Christ to the church, Christ's purchase of and victory for the church, the indwelling of Christ's Spirit within the church, and the church's surrender by faith and love to Christ.¹ To think of Christ without the church is to sever what God has wedded together in holy union.

The church is organically related to Christ more profoundly than any organic relationship that falls within the realm of our experience; she is rooted and built up in Christ (Col. 2:7), is clothed with Christ (Rom. 13:14), and cannot live without Christ (Phil. 1:21). "The church is in Christ as Eve was in Adam," wrote Richard Hooker.

The church is Christ's fullness because the plenitude of His grace is poured out upon her (John 1:16; Col. 2:9-10). The church, Christ's mystical body, "is like a vessel into which the fullness of Christ is poured," wrote L.S. Thornton. "He fills it with himself."² Christ's attributes—truth, power, mercy, love, patience, goodness, righteousness, wisdom—are both the embodiment of the church's virtue and her resources.

All the members of Christ's body are likewise united to one another because of their common Head (1 Cor. 12). All true believers who confess Christ as their exclusive Savior are "joined and united with heart and will, by the power of faith, in one and the same Spirit," says the *Belgic Confession* in Article 27. They are united as members of the household of God, the community of Christ, and the fellowship of the Spirit. There is one gospel (Acts 4:12), one revelation (1 Cor. 2:6-10), one baptism (Eph. 4:5), and one Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 10:17).

A. A. Hodge said that if there is one God, one Christ, one Spirit, and one cross, there can only be one church.³ The believers of this one church are described in New Testament images such as the salt of the earth, the holy temple, the new creation, sanctified slaves, sons of God, and fighters against Satan.⁴ They are many branches in one vine, many sheep in one flock, and many stones in one building. The church is "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

The church's oneness in Christ is indestructible, for it comes from Him. Her unity can be disrupted, however. And when it is, we should feel shame and grief at how divided the church can become because of her unfaithfulness to Christ and her declension from the apostolic pattern of unity. Sins such as inattention to doctrinal and prac-

tical purity (1 Tim. 6:11-21), autonomy (1 Cor. 1:10-17), factionalism (1 Cor. 3:1-23), lust for power (3 John 9), unwillingness to seek reconciliation (Matt. 5:23-26), failure to maintain church discipline (Matt. 18:15-20), and unwillingness to help needy believers (Matt. 25:31-46) tear apart the body of Christ, causing church and denominational splits.⁵ Of the 23,000-plus church denominations today, more than 700 are Reformed.⁶

Still, even the multiplicity of church denominations caused by rifts between believers cannot divide the true family of Christ. Brothers and sisters in a family may quarrel and separate, but they still remain members of one family. Likewise, the church is one body in Christ with many members (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:27), one family of God the Father (Eph. 4:6), and one fellowship in the Spirit (Acts 4:32; Eph. 4:31-32). As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all" (4:4-6).

Rightly understood, the church's oneness should help us avoid the kind of unity that a church claims at the expense of her confessions of truth. Some divisions are essential to keep the true church separate from the false. "Division is better than agreement in evil," George Hutchinson said. Those who support spurious unity by tolerating error and heresy forget that a split based on biblical essentials helps to preserve the true unity of the body of Christ.

An organization that moves away from faithful teaching, true worship, and obedient discipling ceases to be a church. As John Calvin said, "Those who wish to build the church by rejecting the doctrine of the Word build a pigsty, and not the church of God." John Brown added, "The suffering of gross error in the church must be very sinful. It brings contempt on the oracles and ordinances of God,

[and] gives Satan opportunity to employ ordinances and ministers as instruments of rebellion against God."⁷

As Samuel Rutherford warned, "It is a fearful sin to make a rent and a hole in Christ's mystical body because there is a spot in it."



The church's oneness should help us avoid the kind of denominationalism⁸ produced by splits over nonessential doctrines as well as egotistical differences. Such splits violate the unity of the body of Christ. As Samuel Rutherford warned, "It is a fearful sin to make a rent and a hole in Christ's mystical body because there is a spot in it."⁹ Such disunity offends the Father who longs to see His family living in harmony; it offends the Son who died to break down walls of hostility; and it offends the Spirit who dwells within believers to help them live in unity.

Church members must realize that they cannot touch any part of the church's body without affecting the whole body (1 Cor. 12). Disunity affects the whole church, including its work of evangelism. In John 17, Jesus prayed for the unity of the church so the world would believe that God sent His Son to be Savior of the world. Authentic church unity, which is a startling contrast to the strife of the world, is a sign to the world of the unity that exists between the Father and the Son.

Christians therefore should work for unity in the church. As John Murray wrote:

If we are once convinced of the evil of schism in the body of Christ . . . we shall then be constrained to preach the evil, to bring conviction to the hearts of others also, to implore God's grace and wisdom in remedying the evil, and to devise ways and means of healing these ruptures.¹⁰

We need to follow Matthew Henry's advice: "In the great things of religion be of one mind, but when there is not a unity of sentiment, let there be a union of affections."

Authentic church unity is not promoted by exclusive denominationalism nor by the kind of ecumenism that embraces everyone, even those who deny apostolic doctrine. Rather, authentic unity is based on the work of the Spirit, who binds the church together and purifies it as Christ's bride.¹¹ The Spirit dwells within believers and endows them with the gifts to practice unity. That unity is a strong and attractive testimony of the gospel of Christ. Consequently, Paul urged the Corinthians, Ephesians, and Philippians to be of one mind in the Spirit and to be joined and knit together so that they might grow up in every way in Christ (1 Cor. 3:1-17; Phil. 1:27; Eph. 4:1-16). Unity is not something to be created by Christians but something to be safeguarded by the church of all ages through the work of the Spirit.

Despite false attempts at unity and fractionalistic denominationalism, true believers will continue to be united as members of one body of Christ until the end of time, when every external division will disappear. There will be no denominations in heaven. There Christ's prayer that all believers may be one will find true fulfillment (John 17:20-26). In heaven, the unity of the body of Christ will be

resplendent (Rev. 7:9-17). What we now can hardly believe by faith will then be gloriously evident by sight.

Author

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Notes

1. Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Bartel Elshout (Ligonier, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), 2:87-90.
2. *The Common Life in the Body of Christ* (London: Dacre Press, 1950), 310.
3. *Confession of Faith* (1869; London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 310ff.
4. Paul Minear lists 96 figures and analogies that are applied to the church in the New Testament (*Images of the New Testament* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960], 268-69).
5. John M. Frame, *Evangelical Reunion: Denominations and the Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 28.
6. Cf. *World Christian Encyclopedia* (1997); Jean-Jacques Bauswein and Lukas Vischer, eds., *The Reformed Family Worldwide: A Survey of Reformed Churches, Theological Schools and International Organizations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).
7. *Practical Piety Exemplified and Illustrated in Casuistical Hints* (Glasgow: Bruyce, 1783), 330.
8. On the disadvantages of denominationalism, see John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 1:270-71, 275-76, and Frame, *Evangelical Reunion*, 45-56.
9. Cf. Bullinger, *Decades of Henry Bullinger*, ed. Thomas Harding, trans. H.I. (Cambridge: University Press, 1852), 5:49-92; Thomas M'Crie, *The Unity of the Church* (1821; reprint Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage, 1989); David L. Smith, *All God's People: A Theology of the Church* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor, 1996), 393-407.

10. *Collected Writings*, 2:335. Cf. Kuiper, *Glorious Body of Christ* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 46-55.
11. Edmund P. Clowney, *The Doctrine of the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976), 59.